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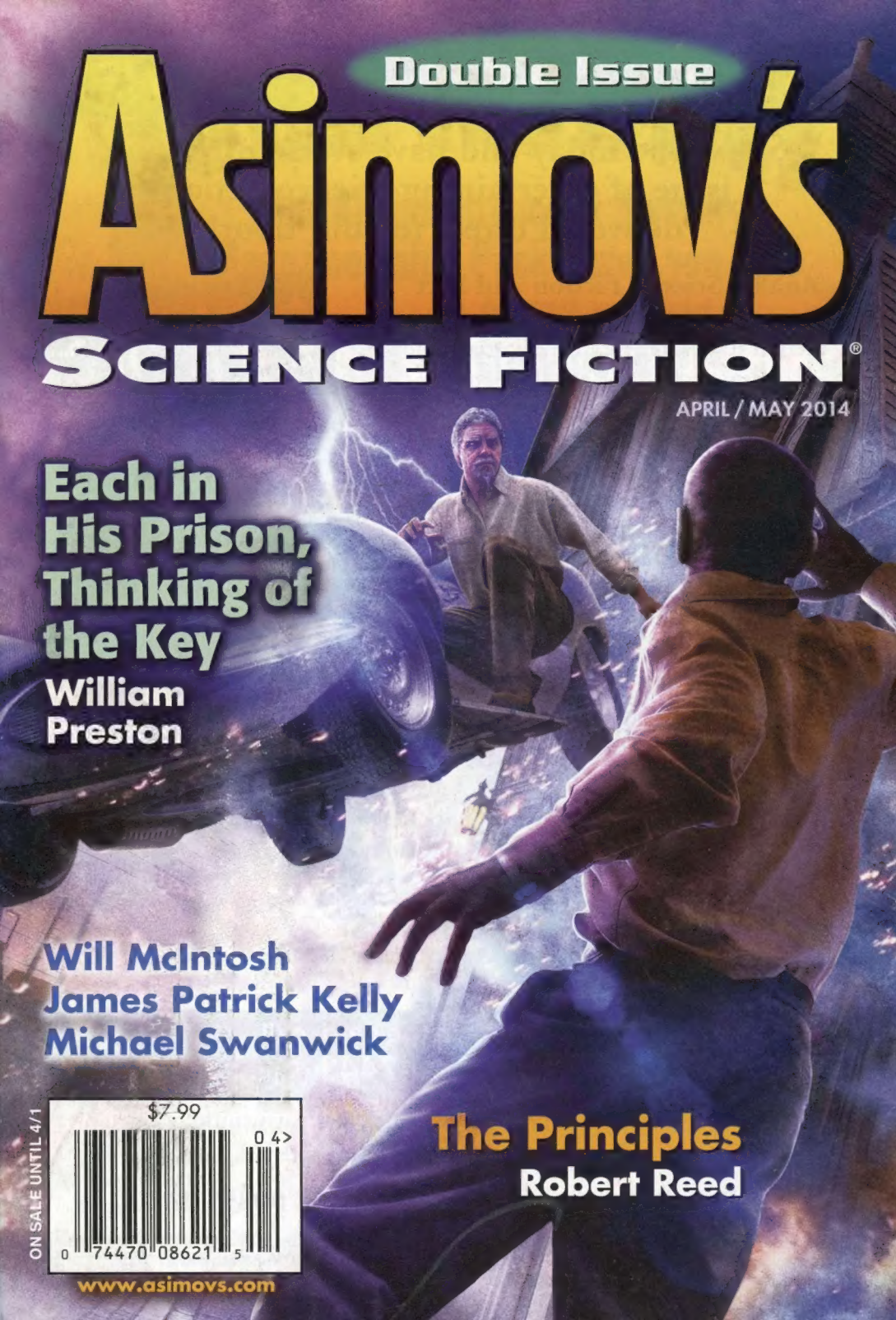

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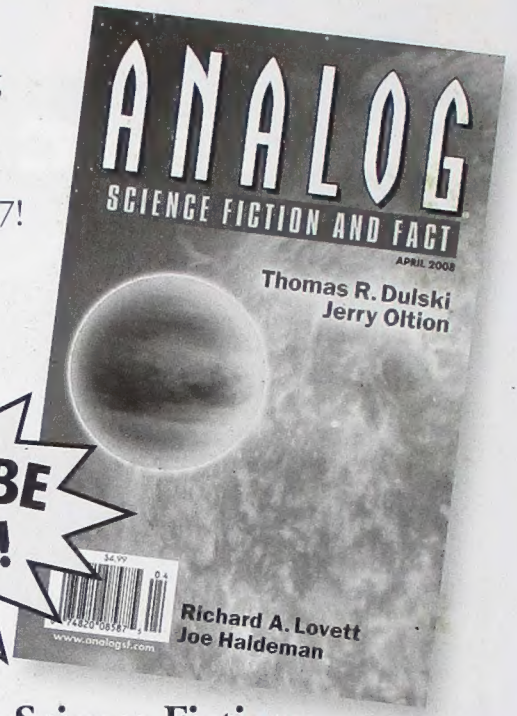

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Asimov's Science Fiction

Novellas

10 Each in His Prison, Thinking of the Key . . . . . William Preston

142 The Principles . . . . . Robert Reed

Novelettes

74 Of Finest Scarlet Was Her Gown . . . . . Michael Swanwick

96 Rules of Engagement . . . . . Matthew Johnson

Short Stories

53 Scout . . . . . Will McIntosh

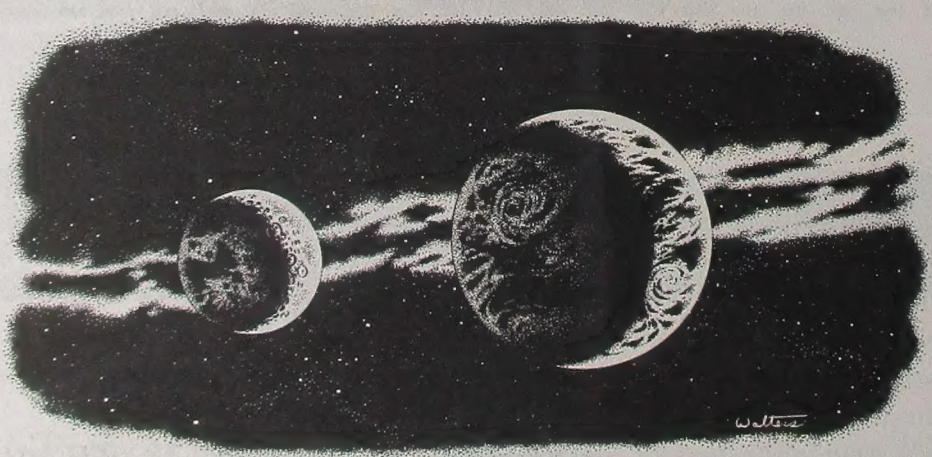
62 Like a Wasp to the Tongue . . . . . Fran Wilde

91 Slowly Upward, the Coelacanth . . . . . M. Bennardo

111 The Talking Cure . . . . . K. J. Zimring

118 Dolores, Big and Strong . . . . . Joe M. McDermott

134 Someday . . . . . James Patrick Kelly



APRIL/MAY 2014

Vol. 38 Nos. 4 & 5
(Whole Numbers 459 & 460)

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Cover Art by Paul Youll for "Each in His Prison, Thinking of the Key"

POETRY

73 CAMEL THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE . . . . . ROBERT BORSKI

95 LATE NIGHTS AROUND THE FIRE CORAL . . . . . BRIAN GARRISON

132 IN THE QUIET HOUR . . . . . BRUCE BOSTON

DEPARTMENTS

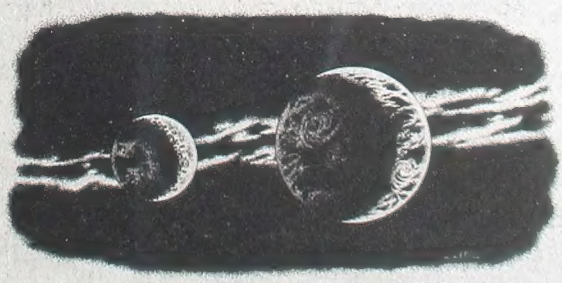
4 EDITORIAL: WHERE ARE THEY NOW? . . . SHEILA WILLIAMS

6 REFLECTIONS: BORGES, LEINSTER, GOOGLE . . . . . ROBERT SILVERBERG

186 NEXT ISSUE . . . . .

187 ON BOOKS . . . . . PAUL DI FILIPPO

192 THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR . . . ERWIN S. STRAUSS



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WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

When Rick Wilber and I co-founded the Dell Magazines Award (then called the Asimov Award) in 1993 we hoped it would help us discover, encourage, and nurture new writers. The award, which is sponsored by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and Dell Magazines, recognizes the best science fiction or fantasy story by a full-time undergraduate college student. This spring at the 35th International Conference for the Fantastic (ICFA) in Florida, Rick and I will celebrate with the winner and many of the finalists for the twentieth time.

To commemorate so many years of fine storytelling, I thought I'd find out where some of our past finalists are today. The very first award winner was Eric Choi, aerospace engineer, writer, and editor, living in Toronto, Canada. He worked on the meteorology payload on the 2008 *Phoenix* Mars Lander. In the 2009, he was also one of the Canadian Space Agency's final forty candidates (out of 5,353 applicants) in their astronaut recruitment drive. This career path may come as no surprise to those who read "Dedication" (*Asimov's*, November 1994), his award-winning story about astronauts on Mars. Eric co-edited the Aurora Award winning anthology *The Dragon and the Stars* (DAW), and he has a story forthcoming from *Analog*.

Although Eric's is the only story, so far, to be published in *Asimov's*, we have been able to run the winning tale online since about 2000. *Asimov's* has also published subsequent stories by Marissa Lingen (winner 1999) and Lena DeTar (winner 2002). A few of the finalists have also appeared in our pages. Well known science fiction author, Creative Commons expert, and Internet blogger Cory Doctorow (honorable mention 1994) has been published in *Asimov's* numerous times. Alice Sola Kim's (second runner-up 2005) beautiful tale about "The Other Graces" appeared in our July 2010 issue, and only after our February 2014 issue with Maurice Broaddus's engaging story about "Steppin' Razor" was delivered to our printer did I realize that this successful author had received an honorable mention from us in 1996.

Our finalists have collected some other impressive awards in the intervening years. E. Lily Yu was a finalist for the Dell Award in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Her 2011 story submission, "The Cartographer Wasps and the Anarchist Bees" was published by *Clarkesworld* and was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards. In 2012, Lily won the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer. Matthew J. Kirby was the first runner-up in 2003. He is now the author of three middle grade novels. Among other honors, Matt has won the Edgar Award for Best Juvenile Mystery and the PEN Center USA award for Children's Literature. Cory Doctorow won his own Campbell Award for best new writer in 2000, and has since added to his trophy shelf several Locus and Sunburst Awards as well as the Prometheus and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award.

In addition to her *Asimov's* tale, Marissa Lingen has sold over ninety short stories. Bryn Neuenschwader, who won the award in 2003, has since become well known under her nom de plume. The latest of her eight novels as "Marie Brennan" is *A Natural History of Dragons*. Bryn has more than forty short stories in print as well. Amelia Beamer, who was our second runner up in 2004 has since written the best selling zombie novel, *The Loving Dead*.

Many other finalists, such as Lara Donnelly (winner 2013), Rich Larson (second-runner-up 2013), Seth Dickinson (winner 2011), Rahul Kanakia (first runner-up 2007), Catherine Krahe (second runner-up 2006), Karina Sumner-Smith (honorable mention 2003), Thomas Seay (first runner-up 2002), Beth Adele Long

(winner 2000), and David Barr Kirtley (winner 1997), have also amassed a number of impressive publications.

I hear from finalists all the time. Many have followed interesting career trajectories outside writing SF—Mark Jacobsen (winner 2001) is a C-17 air force pilot while his ICFA roommate Elan Ruskin (second runner-up 2001) works in the game industry as a senior engine programmer. Monica Eiland (first runner-up 1995) is a medical writer and Emily Thornbury (winner 1998) is an assistant professor of English at UC Berkeley. In addition to a flourishing writing career, Brit Mandelo (third runner-up 2012) is a senior fiction editor at *Strange Horizons*.

Alas, there isn't room to cover all the accomplishments or to even mention all of our gifted finalists. I apologize to everyone for the omissions.

The penultimate word in this editorial belongs to my co-judge Rick Wilber.

> The award has always been a labor of love for me. There's a great deal of organizational work that goes on behind the scenes, and every year there's some worrisome problem or another that has to be dealt with. Then, once the stories are in, there's that intense few weeks of reading the submissions and struggling to narrow down the many good stories to the shorter list of truly excellent ones. That's never an easy job.
>
> But the payoff comes after Sheila and I discuss the finalists and pick the winner, runners-up, and honorable mentions. It's my happy task to email or call those talented writers and let them know they're invited to ICFA where they'll meet many of the finest professionals in the field. Hearing the excitement on the other end of the line, or seeing all the exclamation points in their emails makes all the work absolutely worth the labor. And, heck, following the careers of the finalists as they go on to find their own professional success is a wonderful capstone on the whole process.

Rick and I set out to nurture a bunch of new writers and ended up enriching our own lives because of the wonderful people we've met along the way. ❍

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won 53 Hugos and 27 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 20 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.

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REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

BORGES, LEINSTER, GOOGLE

Today I mean to sing the praises of Google, which I think is the most important single component of the phenomenon that is the Internet. That is no small statement, and, lest I be thought to be in the pay of that vast search-engine organization, I will quickly offer some disclaimers. I am not a Google stockholder. I am not a Google executive or a Google employee. (I have never been anybody's employee since the day, fifty-eight years ago, when I graduated from college.) I don't even *know* any Google executives or employees, even though I live just a hop and a skip from Silicon Valley. What I am, just as most of you are, is a Google user, day in, day out. I understand that some of Google's expansionist ways as a corporation have drawn criticism. But my concern here is with Google as a search engine, not as a corporation. That search engine is essential to modern life. Without it, we might very well drown in our own data. It has rescued us from that dire fate, and, in so doing, I believe it has changed the world.

Isaac Asimov outlined the problem of information retrieval in an essay, "The Sound of Panting," *Astounding Science Fiction,* June 1955. He tells of the difficulties that biochemists had, even back then, in keeping up with the scientific literature of their own field. He was then a professor of biochemistry at Boston University, writing science fiction on the side. "There are literally thousands of journals printed. The aristocrat of biochemical journals is the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*. It comes out once a month. . . . The September 1954 issue contains 480 pages and 45 articles." Coping with it was a major chore. Then, also, there were the *Journal of the American Chemical Society, Science,* its British equivalent *Nature,* the British *Biochemical Journal,* and. . . . He lists another column and a half of English-language scientific periodicals before he gets to the French, German, Spanish, Russian, Dutch, Swedish, and Japanese journals, all of which the biochemists of that day needed to follow in order to stay in touch with current research. These were summarized twice monthly in *Chemical Abstracts,* a bulky tome printed in microscopic type. Its annual index alone occupied three big volumes totaling more than a thousand pages. "There is now a whole branch of human effort devoted to attempting to coordinate the accumulating data of the physical sciences at a rate roughly equivalent to that at which it is accumulating," Asimov said. "This includes the formulation of special types of indices and codes, the use of screening programs, the preparation of special punched cards, micro-card files, and so on."

Special punched cards! Micro-card files! And yet it was all hopeless. No one could stay current. If you were to go past his lab at the university, he said, you would hear "the sound of panting. . . . It is just I. Asimov trying to keep up with the literature."

The great fantasist Jorge Luis Borges, who for many years was director of the National Library of Argentina, gave us in his story "The Library of Babel" a depiction of the universe as a library made up of an infinite number of hexagonal galleries on whose shelves all books that had ever been written or ever *would* be written were stored. "Everything is there: the minute history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalog of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs, a demonstration of the fallacy of these catalogs . . . a version of each book in all languages, the interpretation of every book in all books. . . ."

And how does one find one's way around in an infinite library? With difficulty, and only if one has an infinite amount of time at one's disposal: "In order to locate book A, first consult book B which will indicate the location of book A. In order to locate Book B, first consult book C, and so on ad infinitum. . . . I have squandered and consumed my years in adventures of this type."

Murray Leinster, that early master of science fiction, offered a solution to the information-retrieval problem so vividly depicted by Asimov and Borges in a brilliant 1946 short story called "A Logic Named Joe." Leinster conjured up a future in which everyone was linked to an interconnected network of home computers—"logics," he called them—capable of instantaneously serving up any information one might require if one merely punched a few keys. In one glorious swoop he had imagined the PC, the Internet, and the omniscient search engine, decades ahead of their actual existence.

By the late twentieth century the Internet was here, and with it came the first search engines, replacing Asimov's punched cards and other prehistoric scanning methods. The earliest, it seems, was a Canadian entity called Archie (for "archive") in 1990, followed by Gopher in 1991, Aliweb in 1993, WebCrawler and Lycos in 1994, and then many more—AltaVista, Inktomi, Infoseek, HotBot, etc., some of which are still active.

But the arrival of Google around the year 2000 swept them all into relative obscurity. Like the rest, Google sent webcrawlers everywhere in the Internet to slurp up the nearly infinite amount of information it provided; but the key difference was a Google algorithm, PageRank, which classed web sites according to the number of other web sites linked to them, on the theory that the most useful Web pages were those with the most links to other sites. Thus—within seconds—Google could deliver a huge bundle of links to whatever subject you were asking about and arrange them in their most probable order of usefulness. At once Google became everybody's favorite search engine, and still is, though others now, like Bing, do pretty much the same thing. Its name itself has become a generic verb meaning "to search," just as such brand names as "kleenex," "xerox," "band-aid," and "zipper" have passed into generic use.

You all have Google stories to tell. Like Borges' beleaguered librarian, you dip into its infinite resources every day for all sorts of information, and at the speed of light it sends back to you, almost without fail, links to some web site that will tell you what you want to know.

My own most recent Google story involves an obscure professional basketball player named Bato Govedarica, who played a couple of dozen games for a team called the Syracuse Nationals more than half a century ago, when I was a college sophomore. I am not much of a sports fan now, but until I got to college in 1952 I did pay some attention to the doings of the teams in the city where I lived—New York. And even in the winter of 1953, despite the rigor of my undergraduate studies and my soon-to-be-successful attempts to sell stories to the science fiction magazines, I listened occasionally to broadcasts of the games of our basketball team, the Knicks. And the strange name of Bato Govedarica landed in my memory and stuck.

And stuck. And stuck. Like most writers, I have a more than usually retentive memory (becoming a little porous these days, as I start getting up into my Very Senior years, and more about that in a moment). Years went by, decades, even, and from time to time the name of Bato Govedarica would float up into my consciousness. What team had he played for? What kind of name was "Govedarica"? Why did I care?

Not even Google could answer that third question—I don't know the answer to it myself—but the first two continued to plague me, and a week or two ago I fired up the computer and asked Google to tell me about "Bedo Gobedarika," which was my approximation of the

spelling of his name. But Google does have some limits. It's pretty good at coping with misspellings, but it could tell me nothing about Bedo Gobedarika. There is always a workaround, though, in the Google cosmos. I asked that infallible engine to give me the rosters of every team in the National Basketball Association, and—poof!—there they were. I scrolled through 1951, 1952, 1953—and there was Bato Govedarica, Syracuse Nationals, 23 games played, 1953-54. Now I could go back to Google with the correct spelling, which I did, and—shazam!—I had hundreds of links to web sites providing information about Bato Govedarica.

First came his Wikipedia entry (and how Borges and Leinster would have loved Wikipedia!) with the dates of his birth and death and a summary of his career, and the interesting information that his name was of Serbian origin. Then the basketball league's own compilation of his statistics; and then the Chicago *Tribune's* 2006 obituary, and something in Serbian that indicated that his middle name had been Zdravko, and an account of his college basketball career at DePaul, and the report of the scout who had checked him out as a possibility for the Syracuse pro team (six feet tall, 190 pounds), and on and on and on and on.

Too much information, all right. I didn't really need to know his middle name or how tall he was or where he went to college. I simply had had his name buzzing around in my head for sixty years, until I had begun to think that I had invented it myself, and now a few minutes with Google had confirmed that he had really existed, which was all that I had wanted to know.

As I said, I'm getting into Very Senior territory, and my memory isn't all that it used to be, despite the obstinate perpetual presence of Bato Govedarica in it. Lines of poetry that I once could quote verbatim have vanished. So have details of my own rather extensive list of stories and novels. I don't remember if the Detroit science fiction convention took place in 1959 or 1960, and there was a moment recently when I needed to know. I've been on this planet for nearly eight full decades, and my head is crammed with so much data that I feel that I'm carrying Borges' library around in it. But things fall out. Google puts them back in. So long as I remember approximate spellings, or some other vestige of a clue to what I want to look up, Google will tell me.

Consider Algis Budrys' story "The End of Summer" (*Astounding Science Fiction,* November 1954.) I had forgotten the name of the story, but Google would have given it to me had I asked for a Budrys bibliography, because I could remember the year of its publication. This time I didn't need Google, though, because my fluky memory also remembered that the issue containing it had had a bright yellow spine, unusual for that magazine, and I went right to it on the shelf. The Budrys story is about an era when humans are immortal, but the price of that immortality is short-term amnesia. So they carry their most recent memories around in a sort of external hard drive that Budrys calls a memory vault, chained to their wrists. At the end of the story the protagonist unchains his memory vault and throws it away, and the final line, which, like the name of Bato Govedarica, sticks in my memory after sixty years, is, "He flexed his curiously light arm."

We don't need memory vaults nowadays. Google is the memory vault for everybody. It's the key that opens everything—the true index to the library that is the universe in Borges' little fantasy. It gives us admission to the breathtaking immensity of humanity's accumulated store of information. Without it we'd be lost. ❍

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EACH IN HIS PRISON, THINKING OF THE KEY

William Preston

The action in William Preston's self-contained and powerful new novella almost directly follows his March 2010 story, "Helping Them Take the Old Man Down." The author is looking forward to completing—to his satisfaction and the satisfaction of readers—his Old Man saga with a fifth and final story. He tells us, "Special thanks go to my students, who constantly force me to think more deeply about my own writing as we plunge into great works of the past."

1. Phantom World

Jimmy Randolph, who had driven all four hours of the trip, went silent as they came in view of the lake, seeing a landscape his girlfriend did not see and hearing words she had not heard.

Bekka said, turning from the open window, "*This* is something else. Right? It's *beautiful*." Both hands on the wheel for the highway's curving descent, Jimmy made a sound that signaled agreement. From above, the road followed the lake's slender finger, the valley walls dense with trees, the water blue with the day's blue, the slender finger pointed toward the white beach and the city of Ithaca. Attention on the highway, Jimmy saw overlaid on this bending stretch a two-lane road arrowing between horizontal Texas fields; saw a low sky too bright, scarred with meager gray clouds; felt again, despite the hot air from the road, the harsh sting of a Hummer's air conditioning. The driver, a young man from the base's private security team, wore a sparse red beard that failed to conceal his acne. He heard the man say, "This isn't just nowhere. This is the *capital* of nowhere"—most likely repeating something he'd been told on his arrival, Jimmy thought, but then recognizing how so cynical a response so early in the mission wasn't good.

Most times, Bekka's presence suppressed some of his cynicism, muted his depression. Still, Jimmy wondered how many times someone had said at just that point on

the road, "It's *beautiful*." Was her judgment as common and unconsidered as the judgment of all those others, all those people who couldn't find something to say but had to say something? How far wrong was her judgment about *him?*

His leg jumped when her hand settled on his thigh. "What's running through *your* brain?" she asked.

"Just trying to watch the road," he said, glancing in each mirror, taking in the modest traffic.

"Uh huh," she said, making it clear she didn't believe him. She had picked her hair into a massy weave; the wind pushed it to the roof. Leaning close, she drew her other hand over her forehead to restrain her hair. "Just don't go totally silent on me," she said. "I want my friends to like you."

His clenched lips twitched as he worked to say something, but she let him off, patting his leg. "Okay," she said. "No pressure. Be inside yourself."

How deep inside himself had the prisoner been? And silent for years. Could Jimmy have sustained that? Anyone would hunger for human contact, for human voices, or to hear your own voice, the reassurance that all of you is still there, that you are still familiar to yourself.

The steering wheel suddenly slick, he shifted his grip toward the middle. Perhaps Bekka had let the relationship move too quickly. Surely when she got to know him more fully . . .

The beach below was flecked with people. Jimmy and Bekka planned to meet college friends of hers, stay with them for a night, then, if the weather cooperated, camp at a park near a waterfall; there may have been more details, but he had not been a terribly attentive listener in the past six months, a condition that, rather than improving, had worsened in recent weeks. He imagined lying on a precipice to see water cascade through a cleft, but he couldn't get close enough to see where the water struck bottom. Six months ago, he had stood before a hole in the earth, a guard gripping each arm, and, peering down, known for sure there were mysteries he would never solve.

2. The Stone Avenger

Before lunch, in sunglasses, they strolled the glary white-paved Commons, an open mall with shops on either side. "This here," said Bekka, tugging his elbow, angling him toward a glass-fronted store. THE SAME PAGE TWICE: USED BOOKS. A narrowing chute of glass led to the entrance; when Bekka opened the door, a cold blast shouldered past them.

The twenty-ish male at the elevated front desk wore a rainbow bandanna. "Let me know if I can help you find something," he said. A tattoo, possibly the clawlike conclusion of a wing, patterned his neck, the bulk of the image beneath his yellow, saggy-necked T-shirt.

"I'm a browser." Bekka fanned out both hands and intoned with cosmic significance, "I *explore*."

"I just tag along," Jimmy said, tucking his sunglasses in his shirt pocket. Bekka cast back a puzzled frown he peripherally caught.

"I will make you interested in used bookstores," she said. Had she mentioned this before?

"That can be your mission," he joked, and then regretted the word "mission." Although she was in a graduate physics program, she headed for the art books. He did not follow her.

The air sharpened its chill the deeper Jimmy progressed. At the store's rear, he stopped below a dented lamp clipped to an exposed beam. It registered as too bright and hot—he saw an iconic interrogator's bulb. A stenciled paper banner thumbtacked to the top shelf read "Sci. Fic./Fantasy." A book for the beach. When he was a middle-schooler, he and some friends had passed around a fantasy series, but that was the extent of his exposure to invented book worlds. In high school, he had discovered psychology and philosophy; he almost never read fiction, unless his father passed him one of Walter Mosley's mysteries.

Some books faced outward; he plucked one: a ringed planet in the background, spacesuited people probed with floating mechanisms a richly cratered moon. *Tethys Station*. A desolate place, far from anything familiar. Had that job, he thought. He put back the book.

Idling, he made a cautious effort to empty his mind. The army psychiatrist had recommended it, not caring whether Jimmy wanted to call it prayer or meditation or mindfulness; Bekka had offered to introduce him to yoga, knowing only that he needed to put some stressful events behind him. The problem was, to go blank was the beginning of the process, the first step into the passageway across the gap between himself and another. He had explained this to the doctor, but the man was skeptical. All he saw was someone traumatized by violent experiences. Jimmy's details of the matter defied belief.

Rather than go absolutely empty, he kept up a silly patter in his head: the titles of the books, snide comments on the covers. "I don't think that dress will work in outer space. How does that creature see straight with so many eyes? *Dark Nova?* That's just stupid. *The Unknown Men*. Oooo. Scary. *Dreams of a New World*. Nice raygun, pal. Man, you're too old to fight that—"

Jimmy's inner commentary went silent. The paperback's yellow cover—sky lemony, the human figure and the ground a shade darker—contrasted with the bold orange title—*The Methuselah Ray*—in a flag-shaped banner above the action. An elderly man, bald, his shredded shirt revealing striated muscles on age-slimmed arms, knelt on one knee in a cracked desert, fist drawn back to strike an obscure figure lurching in from beyond the cover, said figure bearing a lantern-shaped object that sent forth a gray-green light.

Cold air rattled the nearby vent. When Jimmy snatched the book from the eye-level shelf, the front cover, barely holding on, missing the top inch, shifted under his thumb. It lacked a back cover.

Book against his chest, he strode purposefully to the front desk. His urgency, his martial stride, caused the clerk to straighten from his slouch. Jimmy snapped the book onto the glass counter.

"What can you tell me about this?"

The clerk hesitated, then shifted his shoulders, bent to look, and relaxed. "Oh, cool. It's a reprint of an old pulp. You like those?" He looked up briefly. "Like the Shadow and shit?" He corrected himself, "And *stuff?*"

"Pulp?"

"Action-adventure, mystery stories, science fiction. The twenties, thirties, so forth. This book's just a reprint, but the story, um, this one's from theee . . . thirties. Early thirties." He looked up again and read Jimmy's ignorance. "They're called pulp because of the cheap paper they used."

Jimmy managed a nod. "And this character—"

"The Stone Avenger." The clerk now had the book in his hand. "I'll tell you, my great-aunt . . . or whatever she was. Great-*great* aunt? Her mother and my great-grandmother were sisters. Does that actually make her my cousin? My mother always said 'your aunt.' Anyway, she wrote a lot of these, a lot in this series." He set the

book down with some care. "I'm pretty sure she wrote this one. He battles this group called End of Days. They have a ray that rapidly ages people," he said, spinning one index finger as if he were unraveling a thread.

Jimmy read the author's name. "Acton Frost?"

"It's a pseudonym. One of the Brontës used Acton. Anne Brontë. Acton Bell. Trying to conceal that she was a woman. Same with my aunt. Women weren't supposed to write pulps. And she wasn't white, either. She was Mohawk. Anyway, the publisher used Acton Frost for what they call a house name for a couple of series. The stories always said Acton Frost no matter who wrote them."

"So this . . . this is fiction."

"Wellll . . ." Jimmy couldn't read his expression, a smile as erratic as his head bobbing. "*This* is a real guy. My aunt knew him. Seriously. That's how she ended up writing the stories. They're based on an actual person. Go dig up newspapers from the thirties and forties and fifties. You can find references. Mysterious giant of a man. A dark man from out of nowhere. Superior intellect. Inventor. Knows what he can't know. Rescuer of the helpless . . . along with his team of *assistants*. He was based in New York, but he got around. There was a book a while back that pulled together all the accounts, but it's out of print. The writer claimed he was even active in the 1970s and eighties. But the novels stopped back in the forties. I think they tried some new ones in the sixties, but his time had passed. He was huge in the pulp days. Like Batman-level huge. And these reprints did well in the seventies."

"*What* did you call him?"

The clerk drew a finger below the tear on the cover, where the bases of some letters remained. "The Stone Avenger. That was the title of the first story, *The Stone Avenger*. He gets completely sealed in rock. And he emerges in kind of a resurrection scene where he's transformed into this . . . *mythic* being. But it's not like people start calling him the Stone Avenger. That was some editor's idea, the same way an editor came up with 'Peanuts' for the Charlie Brown gang. I mean, *maybe* a couple of times someone calls him the Stone Avenger. His followers call him 'Big Man' or 'Boss.' Villains don't even speak about him." His head wobbled again. "Like if they don't say his name, he can't be . . . *summoned*.

"I mean, it's not a bad name. And 'stone' gives you the sense that he's invulnerable. He's not, but of course, if they kill him, the series is over.

"Here, look at this," he said, and produced a magazine from the glass case behind him. "This is one of the original magazines. First it was called *Fighting Men*," he said, pronouncing the title with dramatic verve, "but once he became so popular, it shifted to *The Stone Avenger*. Here's what he looked like in the earlier images, before the reprints. His hair hangs down more. And he's lighter than he is on the paperbacks. I think that's a race thing."

"He's . . . what race is he supposed to be?"

"It never directly comes up. He's described as copper-colored or golden or bronze. There's a line that gets repeated about 'skin darkened by equatorial suns.' Innn-teresting, right?"

"How many of these are there?"

"More than a hundred! See," he said, and leaned over the counter, elbows on the glass, the book in his hands again. He touched the spine, once black, now split with white lines that nearly erased the title. "It's mostly worn off. Number 12. Early one."

Bekka had approached without Jimmy hearing her.

"Look at you," she said. "You buying that?"

He pursed his lips. "Yeah."

"The things I'm learning about you," she said, and picked up the book. "That's a good thing. Little surprises."

"The cover's coming off," Jimmy said to them both.

"Let me put some tape on it," the clerk said. "By the way, I'm Darren." His tongue peeked from the corner of his mouth as he smoothed the tape down. "I tell you, I wish she were still alive to ask about this guy."

Bekka poked Jimmy's arm. "Who's 'she'?"

"His relative. She wrote this."

"She was my great-great aunt. Or probably cousin."

Bekka put her book atop Jimmy's; Jimmy had already produced a ten.

"I'll accept that," Bekka said, and nudged him.

"Computer's down," Darren said. He tapped straight down onto a fat calculator atop the counter, then recorded something on a legal pad. "Funny to think there was a time when someone like this, you know, did his thing. Saved the world." He bagged the books. "Of course, if he were around now, he'd be . . ." He looked upward, wiggling his fingers, calculating.

Jimmy slid the book from the bag. "He'd be like this."

"Ha. Well . . . yeah."

3. Perilous

Brigadier General Weston refilled her glass from the water dispenser, which released gurgles of air into the enormous upended jug. The corner office windows ran the length of two walls, and Weston looked toward the road on which Jimmy had arrived. She quickly drained half her glass. Jimmy, having spent his entire morning seated, over the course of three flights and a drive, stood behind the proffered chair, his black beret joining the general's beige cap on her desk.

"Did you see the video?" she asked. "Of the capture?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Holy Jesus come again, that was something. It took a twenty-person team." She drank the rest of the glass and went to refill it. "Want some?"

"That'd be great, ma'am."

Though air-conditioned, the room felt stuffy, still warm from the morning sun. The general set down her own glass on her featureless metal desk and took another glass from a small table. "The doctor tells me I need to keep hydrated. I just wish I could take in all the water I'm supposed to and not have to hit the bathroom so much." She handed him his water. "Here's to not getting old too fast."

The icy water shocked his front teeth.

"Lieutenant, I've been given no details of your mission, except that you're to conduct an interrogation. You've got the look of an innocent soul, but let me say, I want none of that Abu Ghraib shit here. You didn't put in time there, did you?"

"No," Jimmy said, but he took too long to answer, and the general read it wrong.

"I'm going to require honesty and cooperation from you, Lieutenant, and if those qualities do not make themselves evident to me, I'm shipping you back to Intelligence post haste. In the last two weeks, they've taken both my XO and an entirely affable lieutenant colonel who did just about all the grunt work around here. This assignment may not end with commendations and effusive praise, but I will not have it end with courts martial."

"Honestly, General," Jimmy said. "I didn't. I wasn't there. I was in country. I saw some prisoners on their way there. That's it." He didn't say what a failure it all had been, pointless, both his interrogations and the entire military escapade.

Weston's scrutiny lingered; then her jaw shifted side to side, and she nodded. "All

right. Last time MI came through here was before I arrived. I don't know what all they did, but I know it was ineffective. Every orifice has been examined, and there aren't any weapons of mass destruction up his ass. Whatever's in his brain, they couldn't get it. Truly, I don't know if this guy has any intel or not."

"So why keep holding him?"

"The same reason they'll be holding those poor sons of bitches in Guantanamo for another twenty years."

He nodded, recalling images of cage-like enclosures and kneeling men. "You've been here how long?"

"Nearly two years. The past six months, holding just one man." She swirled the glass as if it held ice, or two substances in need of mixing, and set to gazing on the landscape again.

Jimmy took in the nothing that lay beyond Perilous Base. Twice on the road from the airport, the high-riding car had passed ground-level signs that identified the Texas landscape on either side as a nature refuge, but from Jimmy's perspective, attempts at preserving anything living had failed. A few weeds, an uninviting blank stretch of charmless, lumpy tan: perhaps there was life there that couldn't be seen, below the surface. Or, as he remembered from some grade school lesson, maybe rains visited this dry country one week out of the year, causing flash floods, filling every culvert and ditch, causing the colorless vista to blossom in yellows and reds. What did he know of this part of the world?

Jimmy had imagined the Hummer as if from above, animated, a red line reaching forward toward a set of small cubes set on the desert floor. And then exactly that appeared ahead of him, two-story buildings the color of the earth, surrounded by tiers of wire, and he sucked his upper lip, wondering if the confirmation of his mental picture was another manifestation of his abilities. He'd have to record it in his journal, himself an experiment on which he kept a close watch.

Jimmy said, "Can you tell me anything that isn't in the files?"

"The files," scoffed Weston. "I've never seen records like that. All the standard papers are missing. He might be a foreign national, for all we know. Rumors and adventure stories going back to the 1920s. Supposedly, the man has operatives and contacts everywhere. Either someone is withholding what's known about him, or he has friends who've covered his tracks. Or both." Her gaze wandered. "What's not in the files," she mused. "Well, he's scared of dogs."

"You've got dogs here?"

"The BrightLine people train them here. They've got their own yard for it. That deal was done before I arrived. There used to be MPs with dogs. One day—so the story goes—he was being taken to the yard when the dogs were in the corridor and the dogs spooked him. Shook him up." She paused, waving a finger as she thought of what she might have left out. "Ah. Covey is head of the security people, and for the time being, he reports directly to me." She raised and lowered her head, overemphasizing her visual evaluation of Jimmy. "I assume you're some kind of last-ditch effort."

"That's how I think of it, too, ma'am."

"Let me tell you how this is going to work. No materials of any kind are allowed in there, except what goes in with his meals, and we get that back. We keep every possible tool or weapon away from him; about the only reliable intel is that he's an expert in everything—if you believe some of the anecdotes, the guy can make a black hole in a lab or turn a piece of lint into a concussion grenade. If I could send you in there naked, I would. You'll have two guards with you until he's secured. Then we'll keep an eye on you from next door."

"There's a separate viewing room, is that right?"

"That's right."

"Well, I won't be in the room with him for this . . . procedure. I'll be in the next room. I won't interact with him."

Jimmy watched her turn this over—squinting with one eye, then sitting on the corner of her desk. "Aw, nuts," she said. "Spooky stuff?"

"Ah . . ."

"You gonna tell me what I'm thinking, Lieutenant?"

"No, ma'am. It's not like that. I won't read his mind." As convincingly as possible, he said, "I'm going to realign his will."

He could tell she thought of asking what that phrase might mean, but elected to move on. "And you've had success with this approach?"

"I can't really discuss—" he began, but Weston waved away his words and moved toward the door.

"Unless you've been sent to rescue him, I'll just leave you to do your thing."

Jimmy hefted his duffel from the floor. "I did want to ask: The birth year . . . that can't be right. Not with the fight he put up."

"Over a hundred?" He waited for her to shrug, but instead she said, "With no birth certificate, it's obviously an estimate. He's definitely *old*." She opened the door for Jimmy. "We've been calling him Methusaleh."

4. The Cunning Man

Jimmy pushed his sunglasses closer to his eyes and frowned at the palm-tree print on his trunks—pickings had been slim at Target the day before the trip—while Bekka and her friends, Max and Megan, graduate mathematics students at Cornell, continued to reminisce about Wesleyan. When Jimmy picked up his book, Bekka noticed.

"We might work a little harder to include Jimmy in our conversation," she said.

"I'm fine," he said. "I'll go back in the water in a bit." Three small children rushed past, heels flinging up sand; Bekka sat forward to brush off the towel.

"Ithaca seems like a nice little city," she said. "Was it founded by Greeks?"

"Actually, a lot of towns around here have classical names, the ones without Iroquois names, that is," Max said, and Jimmy watched him tuck in his lips and shut his eyes, preparing to elaborate. He had left his T-shirt off after swimming, and Jimmy figured that he would, in a few hours, be red and in pain. "Roman and Greek cities and personalities. Here's an interesting thing: Seneca was both a Roman senator and an Iroquois nation. There's even a Homer. And an Ovid."

Megan said, "Who's Ovid again?" The meager breeze from off the water swirled across the beach and kept tossing her corn silk hair into her face. "Blah," she said, pulling hair from her mouth.

"Latin poet. He wrote the *Metamorphoses,* a collection of stories about changes, changes of form, people changing into trees or changing into other creatures. Did I tell you? Lipkiss, my classics prof, e-mailed me a poem called 'Ithaka' the other day."

"She was in love with you," Megan said.

"That poem. You mean 'Ulysses'?" Bekka asked.

"No, not the 'To strive, to find . . .' Not that. What's that, Tennyson?"

"Tennyson," agreed Bekka. "I had to memorize that for a recitation in high school." She made a fist and brought her arm across her chest, regal and sonorous. "'To strive, to seek, to find, and *not* to *yield!*'"

"Not that. No, the poem is called 'Ithaka.' There's something with 'Hope the voyage is long . . .' The poet's Cavafy."

"Our voyage to Ithaca wasn't terribly long," Bekka said. "Not of *epic* length, right?" She put her fist against Jimmy's shoulder and shoved, and he turned that into a face-first topple into the blanket. She giggled, tickling him till he sat and grabbed her lively hands.

Max got up on one knee as if to rise, then reseated himself and cleared his throat. "Bekka says you were in the military."

Jimmy grinned. "She speaks the truth," he said, echoing Bekka's stentorian tone. winking at her.

"Did you . . . were you . . ."

Megan's face suggested caution. "Max . . ."

"I'm just . . . I'm not . . ."

"You want to know if I was stationed in Afghanistan or Iraq." Jimmy swung his sunglasses up to rest atop his head. Both men squinted against the brilliance. "I was in Iraq."

"Well." Max gave something like a short nod that might just have been him gauging his tone before he spoke. "Thank you for your service."

Jimmy gave the only adequate answer. "You're welcome." That he had spent time in Iraq was all he had told Bekka, all he could tell her. The other man's face expressed understanding of this stranger on the beach, but Jimmy knew Max didn't know a thing. Looking at the stretch of sand beyond Max, pitted where people had stepped, he thought of the desert floor surrounding the Texas prison, though the texture wasn't the same and the color wasn't the same. Sand came in infinite varieties.

Max asked Jimmy, "Have *you* read *The Odyssey?* Or *The Iliad*?"

"*Odyssey*. In high school." He felt a twinge of sorrow for that lost self.

"I was going to say that when you tie it to *The Iliad,* it's this story about what happens in war and what it's like to be a returning soldier."

"Mm-hm." Jimmy did not want to have this conversation, but he recalled now flattening the book open on his desk. His thumb involuntarily moved, and he recalled the book in his hand. "What was," he began, and thought harder. "There are those phrases like 'wine-dark sea' and 'dawn's something.'"

"Rosy-fingered dawn. That's the Fitzgerald version."

"Didn't Odysseus have some phrase connected with him?"

"It varies," Max said, in his element, not really talking to Jimmy, expounding. "The man of woe. Skilled in ways of contending. Wily. The cunning man. The man of twists and turns. That's Fagles, one of the latest translations. Odysseus is the smartest guy in any Mediterranean room. He can see his way out of any situation, probably because he's been through so much, had so many adventures. His only failing, if it's a failing, is it takes him forever to get back to Ithaka after the war. They're not just a strategy. The twists and turns are his life story."

"He has to get back . . . to his wife?"

"Penelope. Remember, there are all these 'suitors'? The suitors make the mistake of thinking that just because he's old now, or older, he's helpless. He can't possibly fight this crowd of younger men. But everything he's gone through has made him stronger. You can't beat Odysseus." He squinted into this idea, then opened his eyes at Jimmy. "Does that strike you as ridiculous? I mean, personally. You've been in a war, or conflict. And I'm talking about the journeys of this *make-believe* fighter. Wouldn't a real person be . . . traumatized by these things?"

Aware of Bekka sitting stiff beside him, Jimmy pushed his pale soles into the sand, digging with them, making a track. He found himself wondering how far down the sand extended. When did it become dirt, stone, whatever lay deeper? What were the layers? Mantle, crust . . .

Jimmy said, "How can you be sure he's make-believe?"

* * *

When the others returned to the passive lake, Jimmy stayed behind, reading. He had to bring the book close to his face, his sunglasses muddying the view of what was already a challenge, small print on paper going brown with age.

The novel opened with a scene Jimmy assumed had no connection to the tale to come, something to establish the abilities of the great man.

> For such a giant, his movements were astonishingly swift. In a series of actions that appeared as a blur to everyone, including his stunned associates, the Big Man swept two of the gun-toting assailants over the bridge and, before the third man could react, relieved the gape-mouth mobster of his weapon. One blink later, the remaining man was being held aloft by a single steel-strong arm.
>
> "Can your associates swim?" a thunderous voice asked.
>
> "I—I dunno!"
>
> "Mikey and I'll go fetch them, Boss," said Sparks, and the two jumped into the waiting roadster.
>
> "A full explanation would go a long way toward restoring you safely to your feet," said the copper-skinned giant, his voice rolling into the man with such force it made the thug stop squirming.

Jimmy looked at the cover again. The Big Man would survive the dreadful toll of years imposed on him by his enemies; he would not yield; he would grow stronger from the knowledge brought about by suffering.

5. Looking Glass

The black-clad BrightLine guard who led Jimmy to the cell stood a head's-height above him. Stone-faced, not meeting his eyes, hands firmly on his weapon. Quarles, his nametag read. It set Jimmy sideways to have a fellow black man not give him a solid look, but he didn't force matters, waiting to read the man better.

The metal door's window was a square smaller than a face. Quarles turned his cap askew and bent to peer inside. Jimmy studied the cap's BrightLine insignia: what he took to be a curving brown Earth below a pale blue sky, the horizon line thick and white. "There he sits," said Quarles. Still shouldering his duffel, Jimmy moved to look in, glimpsing a pale yellow room and the side of a man's head before Quarles redirected him, saying, "The better view is in here." He led Jimmy several steps to the right and put his hand on a door lever.

The room lit up as they stepped inside. To the left, a featureless wall—gray-black like the others—fuzzily reflected the overhead lights. A row of cabinets were affixed to the opposite wall, and a long, narrow table occupied the middle of the room; two wheeled chairs on the table's right side faced computer screens. A third chair stood orphaned near the blank wall.

"Here's what you want," Quarles said, and he toggled up what looked to be a light switch on a multi-colored panel by the entrance. The blank wall seemed to become transparent, and Jimmy found himself facing his journey's purpose: an elderly man, saddle-colored, bald, barefoot, seated cross-legged on the floor of a well-lit room. He appeared to be considering the point on the floor where his own room ended and Jimmy's began.

Jimmy approached the wall. "Charged panel becomes transparent?"

"Never heard of that. It's a video screen. The room's full of cameras." Quarles tugged open a drawer in the table. "There's a manual around somewhere." He rummaged briefly. "It's a nice piece of technology."

Jimmy nodded, but didn't take his eyes from the old man in the next room. "Is he meditating?"

"I have no idea." Quarles waited a beat, then said, "Military intelligence was here before."

"Yes."

"Before I got here. Cook told me."

"The cook?"

"It's the man's name."

"Oh."

"Cook said they drugged him. This gentleman didn't say shit. You must have heard all this already."

"I've seen his file and I just now talked with General Weston. It's good to hear another perspective. Not everything ends up in the file. People see different things. Or they see things different."

The guard visibly settled into his recounting. "What I've seen is, he's like this *all. The. Time*. We let him out to exercise in the yard, you'd think he'd walk around, but he doesn't so much as pace. Just stands. You'll see. Meals he takes in there. You see he's got a toilet, and in the morning, we take him to the prisoners' bathroom to shave and shower and what have you. The logistics aren't ideal. This place wasn't designed to be a prison, but that's how they've used it."

The prisoner's head came up slightly and his shoulders notched back. Gradually, his chest rose.

"He just sits?"

"He stands. Lies down, too. Usually on the bed, but I've seen him on the floor. Sometimes he sits in that chair. Chair's bolted to the floor. I'll tell you, this man is a master at exerting minimal effort." His hand made a plane and moved along it. "Absolute zero."

"You've never heard his voice."

"You know Bo Peep? Dude is No Peep." Unsure whether to laugh at this, Jimmy briefly showed some teeth. "Only thing I've known him to react to is the dogs. Kind of shies away when they're around," he said, shifting his body from the waist up, "so we intentionally have them in the hall most times he goes through." He winked. "Little intimidation. Not let him think he knows what to expect. And we always put one in the yard with him." He took a step toward the screen. "He did used to whistle. Or something."

"A tune you recognized?"

"Not a song. Just this high-pitched note, like whirring, almost an insect sound. Cicadas," he concluded with more assurance.

"Did you report this?"

Quarles's lower lip drew up as he considered. "It was only a few times. Cook and I thought it was unconscious. Like humming."

The man in the other room blinked and, vegetatively, inhaled, a slender stalk locating the sun. The prisoner's obvious proximity made him seem a part of their little group, and, without thinking, Jimmy watched for any signs that the man was listening.

"Let me ask you," Quarles said. "This guy's been here four years. Somebody still thinks he has actionable intel? Or is he now just a guy who's never getting out of prison?"

"As I understand it, no one knows *what* he might know."

"Nobody here's been told what he did in the first place."

"I'm afraid I can't add anything." Jimmy jerked up one shoulder.

They both watched the old man do nothing. Quarles asked, "How'd you get into this particular line of work?"

"Uh. I'm interested in how people think." He knew it sounded false. As a child on a stepstool, he had looked in the bathroom mirror and wondered if the face past the glass was the same one he wore. He recognized, even at five or so, that his face was not who he was, but something he carried. He sought himself in his own eyes, leaning close, the brown fabric around the pupil pulling back so he could look deeper, trying to locate the self by looking outward from the self and into those other eyes. One day, years later, having nearly forgotten the time he spent in front of the mirror as a child, he saw his face and the unrevealing eyes and understood he needed another approach. He had shut his eyes. He needed to throw his attention inward, to what was unseen.

"I thought I might be a psychiatrist. But . . . I was recruited by Intelligence. It seemed like I could help out. Do some good." How they had selected him was never explained. The most likely thread to tug was a set of experiments run by a doctoral student; in this way, he had inadvertently revealed a talent that only someone in search of such talents would recognize. "How about you? Former military?"

Quarles presented each component distinctly, as if reviewing a list of bullet points. "Former cop. Detroit. Got myself on the Special Response Team there. Buddy hooked me up with BrightLine. Did some security in Iraq." He pronounced it *eye-rack*. "That got heavy."

"I bet."

"So what's your play?"

"I'll be staying in this room. Can I get a cot in here?"

"No problem."

"That will allow me to more fully scrutinize the prisoner." Jimmy didn't like the formality in his voice. He recognized it as the tone he adopted when he couldn't speak freely.

"That's it? Watching him?"

"That's how I work."

"From this room?"

"That's right."

"Ooo-kay," Quarles said, eyes taking in the room as a way of taking in this information. "All right. Next thing is, I'm supposed to show you your quarters. But you're staying here."

"Yes."

"You've got your own john in the other room. You ought to take advantage of that. Keep your clothes there anyway." He pointed at the duffel; Jimmy had never set it down.

"I'm not kicking anyone out, am I?"

"We've got plenty of space." Quarles held open the door. "It's the former XO's quarters."

In the corridor, he saw that it was time for lunch. A guard accompanied by a dog studied the small window into Methuselah's cell while another guard held a tray and waited. The tray looked to have several MRE packs and, lying on its side, a water bottle. The first guard, a white man with a terrifically large jaw, brought his face close to the glass and stared till he was satisfied; Quarles and Jimmy watched, and the dog, too, sought the face of the guard. "All right," said the man.

"That's Covey," Quarles said.

"What's that?" asked the white man, shooting them a look.

"Just pointing you out to the lieutenant," Quarles said. "Cook's got the food." Covey blinked at them, peered once more into the window, then slid back a lower panel. Cook pushed the tray inside.

The dog appeared to have spotted a fly. Its ears twitched back and its head moved to follow the path of something unseen. Covey said, "Hey," and the dog tugged against its leash and aimed a harsh bark at the wall. Covey jerked the leash and the dog sat. Then the dog stood again, ears erect. Covey checked in the window before sliding shut the lower panel. "He's coming for it," he said, and the dog looked up at Covey as though the sentence had been meant for it. Then the entire group moved away without exchanging any greeting, and Quarles led Jimmy back in the direction of the commander's office.

"What was the dog barking at?"

"You know dogs. Sometimes they bark at nothing. Or, you know, ghosts."

Jimmy couldn't read whether he was joking.

"Ghosts? You think this place is haunted?"

"Haven't you heard? Everywhere's haunted."

Jimmy tilted his head quizzically. "You believe in ghosts?"

They came to a turn, and Quarles paused, his thumb rubbing his weapon. "It isn't a question of what I believe. What matters," he said, lowering his voice as if in confidence, then letting one eyebrow twitch up, "is what the dog believes."

6. A Mysterious Figure

Following Max's lead, they took the cars into the city and parked in a nearly vacant supermarket lot. Bekka spotted the back of Max's neck over his collar.

"Whoa. You missed on the sunblock."

He gingerly patted. "Oh, yeah. Already raw."

Megan tugged the collar down for a look. "We'll put aloe on it at home."

They walked a few blocks to a vegetarian restaurant half below ground. The lights seemed dim to Jimmy, who struggled to read the menu and ordered a meal he spotted on a neighboring table. Max and Megan spent much of the time explaining a complicated television show—a spy story of sorts—to the two of them. Jimmy managed to lob some questions, but his food tasted wrong, the cheesy meal too sweet. He remembered a meal of similar sweetness from one evening in Iraq, a treat that accompanied a visiting general; his first non-MRE in a long time, he had studied everyone else's reaction as he picked at the food, suspecting an insurgent had poisoned them.

Jimmy's eyes resisted focusing, so he asked Bekka to drive the next leg.

At the Cornell campus, Max and Megan gave a meandering tour, ending in dusky half-light at the quad, where they sat on a statue's accommodating base and watched the students cross the lawn. At one point, Max saw someone he knew, a slender brown figure Jimmy could barely make out, and hurried across the grass to her. They hugged.

"She's getting married next week," he said on his return, shaking his head, marveling.

All of these people in their bubbles of safety pressed Jimmy further inward. He imagined holes opening in the walkways and people yanked down; he felt no anxiety, but rather a helpless concession to the dangerous reality underlying every solid thing. Perhaps some of these people thought about the two wars, desperate prisoners, families waiting for letters, the maimed in hospitals. The evening was too pleasant for his comfort.

* * *

The day had gone dark by the time they separated stacked plastic chairs and set them scraping on the cement balcony at Max and Megan's apartment. A rough-voiced dog, blocks away, intermittently remarked on something it found agitating. Jimmy didn't quite appreciate the tension across his chest until Max said, "Man, that dog." Sickness gathered in Jimmy's mouth, and all the passages that take in air—nose, throat, the chambers of the lungs—clenched.

In the bathroom, he ran water but didn't touch it, forearms on the sink's lip, his hands shaking as if palsied. Then he retreated to the one bedroom; the owners had insisted Jimmy and Bekka sleep there, a kindness that troubled him by its being too kind. He sat on the bed's sunken edge and studied the cover of *The Methuselah Ray*. Words and the impressions of words bubbled up, but he only said, "Goddammit."

Bekka stood in the doorway. "What's that?"

He held it up. "The book I bought."

"No. What you said."

"Oh. I was thinking about something."

She asked if he was coming back or turning in, and he managed only noncommittal phrases; her hand lingering on the doorframe conveyed her disappointment. He resolved to return to the balcony after only a minute, after two paragraphs, but it took him ten pages to set it down, and when he did, he heard the balcony door slide closed as the group reentered the apartment. The bedroom door had been left ajar, and it had, through whatever means, eased half open. The TV came on. The insistent words buffeted him as he closed his eyes, shutting out the sound. He pictured Bekka and her friends arrayed about the living room. He sensed fragments of each person, edges, nothing more, nothing more than what he would catch by looking at them if he passed through the room.

He adjusted the pillow at his back and opened his book again, but he didn't read. When he saw the word "left," he thought what it would be like if Bekka weren't with him tomorrow. This roused him at last.

He stepped out among the uncertain faces and received a greeting from everyone that was so intended to make him feel welcome that instead he felt like the focus of speculation. Evidently, they had been talking about him.

Max pottered about the kitchen; Bekka and Megan shared the small marshmallow of a sofa; Jimmy took a stuffed chair. They all watched the weather report. On the map of the state, every county line and town appeared clear and unobscured. Nothing was happening, meteorologically speaking, and this was the entirety of the report, though it went on for several minutes. Max turned off the television and sat on the wooden arm of the second sofa, and they recounted the day and batted about what they might do tomorrow. Not until the afternoon would Bekka and Jimmy set off to camp with gear borrowed from Max and Megan.

After they had said their goodnights and Bekka had shut the bedroom door, Jimmy ventured, "I know you don't like my being so quiet."

Bekka took in breath, stretching her upper body as if preparing to speak some truth, then seemed to deflate a bit. She brought up both palms and crookedly grinned. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say. We've had this conversation."

"You're right. Remind me what we've said."

"Really? Mr. Randolph, you're being needy. That, I don't like. Quiet I'm fine with."

"I hope you mean that." They stood on either side of the bed.

"I do not find silence in a man enigmatic or charming. Okay? I *know* you're dealing with some . . . some unpleasant things, and I know there are things you haven't told me. If that becomes a problem for me, then I suppose we won't be together at that point. I've got private things too. I don't tell you everything."

This hummed through him. He opened his mouth, but she continued.

"As I've said, and as is obvious, I like spending time with you and even sharing a bed with you, which I do not take lightly. You're the first guy I've been around who makes me better, makes me a better person, a better version of who I am. How's that? And you've got a pretty face." They eyed each other bluntly, her wry smile unaltered. "What can I tell you?"

He waited too long to voice something complementary, thinking whatever he said would sound insincere, and she let the moment go.

They undressed and commenced to reading; he realized he hadn't asked about her morning's purchase.

"What's that book again?"

"Tyson. Astronomer. Talking about being a black scientist. How's your 'pulp'?"

"Uh . . . fun. It started off with the Big Man taking out a few thugs wham bam. Then this other guy who looks like a bag of bones comes along and collapses at his feet. And then—Do you want to hear this?"

"Keep going."

He sat up a bit. "So two guys are in a restaurant and one just all of a sudden turns ancient. He was telling this longtime friend that he's made a discovery, and the friend goes to the bathroom, and when he comes back, the other guy is ninety and having a heart attack. Falls out of his chair, knocks over the waiter. Panic erupts. People run out waving their arms. Then the hero shows up to interview the friend. The police get out of his way and let him do whatever he wants. They know he's better at this kind of thing than they are."

"I thought our friend said these were based on actual events. I mean, come on."

Jimmy scowled at the cover. The heroic pose, even in defeat. The foregrounded figure with his back to the viewer, holding toward the hero the lantern-like device.

"No, I get you. None of it seems tremendously believable. He did say some of the stories are invented. Listen to the other titles." He flipped to the page that listed other books in the series. "*World Inside the Earth. He Died Three Times. The Living Comet. The Metal People. Message from the Future.* No ma'am, these do not sound grounded in the real world."

Bekka held up one finger. "As a student of physics, allow me to provide a counter-argument: the more we know about the world, the more we know how little we know."

"Still. I don't think anyone's invented a Methusaleh Ray."

Her head rocked in consideration. "Maybe it's a metaphor for sunlight. That man's aged skin is entirely the result of not using sunblock." Both of their eyes shone. "Max is gonna look like that by the time he's forty!"

They both laughed, then clamped their mouths shut—as if Max might know they were laughing at him. Jimmy tapped her on the nose with the book. The day had been, remarkably, salvaged.

Three in the morning. Jimmy blinked his sticky eyes to confirm the numbers on the digital clock. Then, in a fugue of vivid recall, he truly heard the news report that had slipped through the open door hours ago. Multiple sinkholes had simultaneously opened in a small town in Pennsylvania. A woman's car had dropped into one hole and she had known with certainty, as water filled the car, that she was dead; but a man appeared. "He wrenched the door off, then pulled me up." Afterward, he had slipped away. She described a tall, elderly man, possibly black or Hispanic.

Jimmy saw a dark passage and a silhouetted figure seated at the end, lifting his head, daring him to look back.

He was going to need the car.

7. Passageway

The method had run into trouble when they had tried it in Iraq. The barriers were too great, a set of palisades too tall to leap, palisades not just of language, which in theory shouldn't have caused problems, but of worldview, of belief and intent. You needed, ideally, to not only know something of the other person, but understand the other person. The people Jimmy tried to connect with were, in some cases, his true and absolute enemy, people whose hatred for his country and its people was an insurmountable wall. He didn't have the tools to deconstruct such an edifice. The training had not prepared them for this, and Jimmy suspected, though was never told, that the other members of his unit met the same level of failure.

In other cases, though, where such firm convictions were not present, a connection was possible, and connections occurred. Being in the same room helped, but a subject who was fully conscious was more likely to be actively unwilling. Asleep could work, but the passageway remained dark for so long, Jimmy had sometimes panicked or lost consciousness himself.

The holding facility—for captives en route to one or another prison—had been a terrible place for employing such outré methods, its halls and rooms too close, full of a smell the Americans hadn't been able to scrub from the walls, the facility occasionally coming under fire, and finally, after a year of no results, there had come one disastrous result, the prisoner shooting himself when he awoke from the passageway, having seized one of the MP's guns. He was a sixteen-year-old from the countryside who they'd hoped could give them solid information about the source of particularly nasty IEDs. Jimmy concluded that the notion of suicide—never far from the young man's mind in such hopeless circumstances—had taken hold due to whatever jostling Jimmy had done in the boy's psyche. No one else blamed Jimmy. In fact, given the way things were going that week in country, no one felt especially bad, which had unsettled him even more.

Quarles helped Jimmy heft the thin mattress and iron frame down the hall to the observation room, then brought him half a box of MREs and several water bottles. That first afternoon at Perilous Base, Jimmy watched the prisoner without break. Sipping his water so he wouldn't have to hit the john too often, Jimmy paced, stood, or sat before the prisoner's image, observing a man who barely moved, gathering material, not yet constructing the passageway.

Methusaleh—as Jimmy now thought of him—got up once from his cross-legged pose, unfolding himself with a slowness either pained or stately—Jimmy couldn't judge—to relieve himself in the corner toilet. Allowing him some privacy, Jimmy looked away, though the audio pickup, which he hadn't realized was on until then, let him know when the man was done.

Eyes on the prisoner, he turned on one of the computers, then sat. Methusaleh now lay prone on the floor. Jimmy accessed the few remaining digital documents regarding the prisoner. Reports from across the decades hailed the man as an expert in a host of academic fields, and possibly even a medical doctor and surgeon. No one could say what had been lost at the Canadian Arctic base, but the recovered snowmobile, and accounts of the rapid implosion and contained conflagration that had destroyed whatever lay within, suggested the man had access to and was likely the inventor of impressive technology. The report also mentioned an extensive tunnel system, though what little remained of it, once American troops had sent charges deep inside and sealed one end, seemed naturally occurring rather than the result of a construction project. Everything he touched had been made strange.

An additional document, images of someone's handwritten notes, concerned the August 2001 removal of print materials from World Trade Center Tower One, an indication that the prisoner knew what was to come. A charitable organization had collected the personal library and sold the entire contents to collectors and academic institutions. Twenty thousand volumes. Would it be worthwhile to track them down and search their pages for coded clues?

Jimmy considered the blank cell, the man staring upward at the unremarkable ceiling. He left his seat and came close to the screen, stepping quietly, faintly worried that, in the passageway, the two of them would be together and alone.

General Weston entered late-afternoon, capless but otherwise fully attired in desert dress. Jimmy's green jacket draped his chair back, and he had rolled up his tan sleeves.

"You settled in?" She smiled at the mattress. "Want us to install a latrine?"

"I'll let you know, ma'am."

Weston ambled between Jimmy and the screen, hands clasped behind her back as she considered the prisoner. Jimmy flipped over his essentially blank notepad; it was dotted with blue marks from him tapping his pen.

"Did this man ever read?" Jimmy asked.

"What do you mean? Like as a test?"

"Books. A newspaper."

"He's never requested a book—but he's never spoken. I suppose we could put some books in with him. What, you want to run an experiment? Give him a Bible, Koran, poetry, *Mein Kampf* . . . a romance novel? See what he picks up?"

Jimmy stood and splayed his hands on the table; his rear end had gone numb from sitting. "I don't think he'd pick up anything. It's just . . . the man's supposedly some kind of super-genius."

"That's the good word."

"*Highly* educated. Amassed a large personal library. And he doesn't feel the need to read? Ever?" Now he stood alongside Weston, though neither was looking at the other. As they watched, the prisoner sat up. He assumed a squatting position, head ducked down as if he might be sick. "Has he been traumatized? Maybe what interrogators have seen as *resistance,* such as his elective mutism, is depression."

Weston pointed with her thumb. "Four years of *this,* according to all accounts. This absolute silence. But he moves when he's told to move. Eats his meals. Eats a fair amount, in fact. Brushes his teeth. Does this really look like depression to you? Or—I know this isn't a scientific term, but—does it look like despair?"

The word entered Jimmy as if it had stepped into his chest. No, it didn't look like despair. Methusaleh hadn't collapsed under psychological pressure. He'd only, what? Burrowed deeper inside himself? Making it even harder to reach him.

"Anyway," the general said. The door to the prisoner's room opened. "I wanted to give you the heads-up that it was time for his exercise. You'll want to see this. Maybe it'll help . . . structure your hypothesis."

A guard entered the prisoner's room, carrying shackles.

By the time Jimmy stepped into the hallway, the three BrightLine guards—one of whom was Quarles and one of whom had a dog—and Methusaleh had already started in the other direction, their pace dictated by the prisoner's shuffling, shackled gait. The loose-fitting prison garb made close observation a challenge, but it appeared that he walked with his knees bent, as if he could hardly support the weight of his slender body. The file had put the old man at six-foot-five, but he hardly seemed six feet tall; even accounting for the reduced stature that comes with age, he

didn't measure up. Upright and sturdy, the guards flanked him like moving columns. Even the dog, a German shepherd, seemed like a larger, superior being.

When the group stopped at a door, the old man's head dipped farther, and when they proceeded, Jimmy remained where he was for a moment, half sure that the prisoner had, at the dropping of his head, somehow caught sight of and assessed what was behind him. Jimmy felt the corridor constrict. But the moment passed, and the men vanished behind the door.

The door swung back open. Quarles asked, "You coming, lieutenant? General?" Weston had lingered about ten steps back, watching.

"Let's go," she said.

Once through, there were doors ahead and to the left. The prisoner and two of the guards were gone. Quarles held the door on the left for Jimmy and Weston before leaving them.

A window that Jimmy assumed was one-way, nearly the width of the room, showed the fenced dirt yard under a high canopy and, miles off, made more vague by the gray fence, mesas rising from the flatness; two computer screens showed the yard from two other angles, from cameras positioned, apparently, below the canopy. A man and a woman, both BrightLine employees, attended the monitors. It took Jimmy a moment to realize the man had been his driver, his face now a mask of seriousness that also appeared slack with boredom.

"All for one man," Weston said.

"How many people used to be held here?"

"About two dozen, at the height. With more guards, back when we had MPs. Even after I came on, we had as many as ten prisoners."

In the yard, the guards took stable positions and watched as the prisoner shambled a dozen steps along a curving course before stopping.

"Audio, please," said Weston, and the woman flicked a switch.

"—level ten," one man said. "You should see Covey. He gets up to twelve before he runs into trouble."

"Covey's a demon on games," said Quarles.

"You can turn it down," said Weston, and the guard complied till the chatter became a hum. The volume jumped momentarily when one of the dogs barked sharply in the direction of the roof. The guard tugged his chain and said something firm to the animal. "This is pretty much it," said Weston. "This goes on for half an hour." She sighed and opened her hands. "I'll be in my quarters," she said. "You tell me if you get anything."

"Immediately," Jimmy said.

Building the passageway required a way in, images and notions from the subject's own life. Jimmy had a host of those keys already, superficial though they may have been: books, intelligence, scholarship, rootlessness, adventure, invention. Now he had another: *In control.*

Over the course of the exercise period, the only change was when the prisoner bent down, put a hand to the dirt, and lowered himself to his knees. Even from here, Jimmy could see the figure shaking with the effort. Then Methusaleh touched his head to the ground.

He remained that way until the guards rousted him.

Cook arrived around seven o'clock to let Jimmy know he had assumed hall duty. To Jimmy's dismay, Cook stayed to watch the prisoner—upright in his chair, eyes shut, hands at either side.

Cook wanted to talk. "We've got nothing to do most of the time, but we keep up our end. This can't last much longer. That's what we figure. Not even the government of

the United States wants to waste this much money on one guy. . . . But that's why you're here, right?" Cook had trouble holding still, dancing slightly from foot to foot. Or perhaps the unnatural stillness of the prisoner made him physically anxious. "You're shuttin' this whole thing *down*."

"Am I?"

"What, you're not? Come on, you're just drawing up some final report. Sitting here just watching, making some kind of *evaluation*. They gonna Guantanamo his ass? Or send him to Egypt or someplace, let *them* work him over? Or they gonna send him back to Afghanistan?"

"What makes you think he's from Afghanistan?"

Cook twisted his face, then flexed his neck as if a change of angle were necessary. "What, you think he looks American?"

Jimmy didn't know how to answer.

Cook righted himself. "You should check out his eyes. There's a zoom on this screen. They're kind of orange."

"Zoom," Jimmy said. He took a step toward the multicolored control panel.

"I mean, it doesn't matter. Dude's a terrorist, right? Probably Muslim?" Jimmy blinked slowly at Cook's twitchiness. "No offense if *you're* one, but, he's gotta be Muslim, right?"

Resisting the urge to formulate a dismissive answer, Jimmy settled for ignoring Cook. He pictured the scene in the exercise yard. The prisoner went to his knees. He touched his head to the ground.

"Hm," Jimmy said, his questions too many, a swelling cloud. Cook gave him a nod before leaving.

One desk lamp shone. Bed at a right angle to the screen, using the little space available at the room's far end, Jimmy lay on his side to watch the other man. He knew blacking out his own room would make him feel as if he and Methusaleh shared a space. Later, they would share a space of his own making. Not yet.

When lights-out came for the prisoner at ten, Jimmy continued watching. As the hall lights never went out, the yellow rectangle in the prisoner's door glowed all night. Jimmy's door had an interior shutter he had closed. Eventually, he left the bed and turned off both the audio and video. The wall went gray. He hesitated, then switched off the lamp.

In Jimmy's dream, the prison cell was brighter than he remembered. Methusaleh sat cross-legged in the other room. Voices skittered along the walls. The voices might have been leaking in from the outer world, but in his dream, Jimmy somehow understood that minute beings occupied the room's edges. Spectral, Jimmy moved unencumbered and unnoticed through the cell: swooping close to the prisoner's face, which seemed yellow before deepening to brown like tobacco juice; rising to the ceiling to inspect whatever the prisoner might have found of interest in its speckled surface; hovering above the tidy, unvisited bed. Then he observed the prisoner from the front once more and noticed that the man was suspended several feet above the floor.

Jimmy woke, saw the gray wall, concluded that the prisoner had floated away, and went back to sleep.

Cook showed up again in the middle of the night, just after Jimmy had awakened and jotted his dreams in his notebook.

"I saw you were up," Cook said from the doorway.

Jimmy frowned at the door's small window, still sealed, and Cook pointed his weapon in a sweeping motion toward the ceiling. "Cameras."

Jimmy hadn't thought. "Of course." Of course the people in security were watching him as well. What else was there to watch at this hour?

Quarles knocked, though he opened the door without waiting for Jimmy to respond. Onscreen, the old man stood facing into the observation room, crookedly upright.

"How'd crashing in here work for you?"

It took Jimmy a moment to answer; he'd been staring back at the prisoner for several minutes. "It was all right," he said. "Thanks," he added, though he wasn't sure the man was concerned. Jimmy took a drink of warm water. The clammy air made him shiver. Quarles looked back and forth between Jimmy and the prisoner.

"What do you want to ask me?" Jimmy said.

"This gentleman here. You think he's . . . a brother?" One eyebrow cocked.

"What, black?"

"Yes." Both brows came up. "Buh-lack."

"The file . . . I think the file says he's white." Jimmy's own father was half-white, but not to most eyes; Jimmy's aunt was pale, straight-haired without ever touching relaxer.

Quarles nodded his head side to side. "Oh, well, if the *file* says so. . . ." Jimmy regarded the prisoner with altered eyes. "Want a closer look? It's easier if you don't use that pad." Quarles touched the wall screen, and a green dot appeared beneath his finger. He let his weapon hang from its strap as he brought up his right hand and spread the fingers to make a box that framed the prisoner's face. He tapped the box, and the face took up the entire wall. The orange-brown eyes took in everything. Jimmy had taken a step backward without realizing it. There was *something* to the shape of the face.

Another key to the passageway: *Hidden. Even when seen, still hidden. Only you know who you truly are.*

Quarles said, "You've really got to find that manual."

8. Hole in the World

Jimmy drove without seeing the road, seeing instead—reenacted, himself in the narrative—the eyewitness account he'd read online.

A street between shops becomes the turning sky; the sky retreats as the helpless driver sees the world narrow and darken on all sides. A scream rummaged up along Jimmy's throat, though he didn't himself make a sound. Anyone in such a situation would scream without thinking someone might hear, only because it's what a person does, cry out for help, whether or not you believe anyone might be near enough to listen. The driver lies sideways, pinned, and the car shudders deeper still. Then comes the shock of icy water gushing in. And then, against the impending dark finale, the door grinds back and away. You're hauled up, drenched and breathless, into the light. He has you in his arms.

Jimmy gasped.

Here was his problem: it was often easier to imagine himself as someone else.

He noticed his speed had dipped. It was a two-lane road, curving, with no passing allowed, and five cars crawled behind him, the nearest one flashing its lights. He swallowed and accelerated.

His car on a side street, Jimmy stood behind the ring of yellow sawhorses while

another car groaningly rose, winched upward from the pit, an SUV with a smashed windshield. The news stories hadn't done justice to what had befallen the town—or he'd failed to appreciate the magnitude of the problem. A day after the event, wreckers still labored to lift cars from the sinkholes, three of which he'd passed on the way into town. This hole—scene of the eyewitness account—had consumed nearly half a block in the center of town, a four-lane collapse digging into the sidewalk, taking out in addition the cement under a pizza place awning and the walkway by a barber shop door on the side of the street where he stood. Fat brown pipes, one of which had ruptured, criss-crossed the rift. The sun hung directly overhead.

At his back, a diner's bell jingled. "That the last one?" The man wore a blue corduroy jacket that couldn't possibly close. His ruddy beard reached nearly to his navel.

"The last car?"

"Yeah."

"It looks to be."

"That's the one. The Stitch family. Good thing the kids weren't in there. She had just parked and gotten them out."

"I heard two people died."

"Not here. Beech Street." The man regarded him frankly, and Jimmy saw himself recognized as a stranger. "You came to see this?"

"Not this. I'm looking for one of the rescuers. I thought I recognized him from the report."

"What, one of the EMTs?"

"No. A . . . stranger." The other man's eyes had gone glassy, and he squeezed his beard reflectively. "Did you know the people who died?"

"I did. Not well."

The SUV slammed down onto its chassis, the edge of the sinkhole having given way just as the back wheels of the vehicle breached.

"Ouch," said the other man.

Jimmy said, "Did you hear that story, about a stranger pulling somebody out of the wreckage?"

"I did indeed." Now he patted his beard while watching the activity at the sinkhole. Two jumpsuited workmen peered into the deeps. "Several people were pulled out. But I know the woman you mean, the one they interviewed. She's a teacher."

"Do you know where she lives?"

The other nodded as if agreeing with a profound thought, then stepped past Jimmy and continued to the yellow tape, where he surveyed the scene. Jimmy waited for a beat, then joined him.

The two men operating the winch noticed them. They both raised their hands and called. "Mr. Seton!"

"Gentlemen!" he called back, not otherwise moving.

"Ain't this somethin'!" one man shouted.

"You can say that again!" Seton turned to Jimmy. "I taught them. Math."

"You said you know—"

"Back here," Seton said, turning about. "I just left her. You know what's odd about these sinkholes?"

Jimmy gave the street another look. "The size?"

"The unlikelihood. One is possible. Some kind of groundwater erosion or poor structure over the sewers or . . . I don't know. But five at once, or nearly at once? Not a'tall likely."

"Do the holes lead somewhere?"

They had paused at the diner door. One small table with two chairs sat on a dais in

the window, but Jimmy couldn't see beyond that. "Lead somewhere? What do you mean?" He tugged on the door. "Cheryl Larsen's in here, trying to enjoy what's left of her summer." Jimmy remembered the book, back in the car.

"I have to get something. Can you just keep her there a minute?"

The other man's head dipped so his brows hooded his gaze. "You're not getting a camera, are you?"

"No," Jimmy said. "No. A book. My car's right around the corner. I left a book. Right back," and he strode away, wanting to run but having kept a permanent recording inside his head of his father saying, "It always looks bad when a black man runs away." He gritted his teeth to think that he would likely never lose that recording.

The book lay on the back seat, alongside the duffel, warm to the touch.

Seton had remained by the door, arms folded. "That was quick," Seton said, and Jimmy gave him a smile meant to put the other man at ease.

The place smelled of baked goods and air-conditioning. At one table, an older couple facing at right angles to each other munched on sandwiches. The woman behind the counter wiped the surface without applying evident pressure. Seton led Jimmy to a table where a single woman sat, her arm in a sling. A cap unsuccessfully contained the permed ball of her hair.

Seton said, "Here's a man who's come to see you."

"Ms. Larson?" Jimmy said.

Keeping her good hand on the table, she raised its index finger. "Did I teach you? I'm terrible with names."

"No, ma'am. You don't know me."

"It's about the sinkhole," Seton said.

"Actually," Jimmy said, holding the book toward her, "it's about this man."

Cheryl Larsen's mouth opened as if tugged down by an invisible string. She met Jimmy's eyes and shut her mouth. Her good hand tapped the book.

"That," she said, "is uncanny."

9. In Plain Sight

The prisoner slumped on the floor, perhaps napping. Jimmy tugged the lever on his chair, adjusting the back. Reflexively, he cleared his throat. He would not be speaking. If he succeeded, Methusaleh would speak; he would, of his own free will, answer their questions.

Oblonski, the lieutenant colonel who had trained Jimmy and those whom Oblonski called "my happy few," made sure to differentiate their methods from the methods of their enemies and the methods of the past.

"Our ways are not their ways," he had insisted. They would not engage in the farce of confession and reeducation by which the Chinese Communists had coerced the state's foes. Neither would they break people on the rack of sleep deprivation, confusion, threats, and physical abuse. No, this process slipped beneath a subject's problematic motives, established sympathy, and redirected the will based on an enlightened view of the world and the common good.

That was the theory.

And you had to know yourself, what you held true as well as what seized you with terror. You had to embrace your past—not only memories, but those forgotten events and people who had shaped you nonetheless, recollected in your muscles and your ethics, your way of smiling, walking. You were what came before. Every prior moment went into this one. What was this moment?

* * *

Jimmy silenced himself and opened the pores of his sensations. Once you established the fullness of context, you could slice away at what you did not need. He shut his eyes. First to be eliminated from his awareness: the room in which he sat—chairs, table, machines—and Methusaleh's cell—bed, toilet. The lit space around the prisoner darkened, not as if the lights were dimming, but as if nearer walls were being set in place. The passageway. Everything inessential eradicated. To move along the passageway, to cross the brief yet impossible distance, Jimmy required key words, ideas, insights; whatever he knew about a subject advanced the two of them toward each other. Where they would meet in the middle was where Jimmy, who had built the space, could speak to the subject's deepest self.

There sat an image of the prisoner, an image built not only of Jimmy's perceptions but, if he had done his work well, of the other person's own sense of self. In that way, the other was drawn forward, sharing space with the conception Jimmy had built. Jimmy could linger with that other, listen to the mutterings of another self. If the process worked, these stages moved more quickly with each iteration, and the other person, unconscious yet aware, could more readily slip into that virtual homunculus.

Jimmy peered down a black corridor, the prisoner faintly visible at the other end. Jimmy maintained the distance, studying the figure, keeping it steady and coherent.

He drifted forward along the passageway; he compelled the prisoner to move forward as well—all he wanted was to see some potential for movement on this initial attempt. He employed his keywords like charms. *In control. You're always in control. No one tells you when to speak. Powerful. You can make people do what you wish. The strength of your arms and the strength of your intellect motivate people. You toss your enemies away. Hidden. In the tower room. In the Arctic ice. No one knows who you truly are.*

Jimmy went through the monologue again, as he'd rehearsed, summoning the old man forward, open to response.

Nothing. The passageway smelled ancient, disused. He opened his eyes, and the details of the world returned, so sudden in their actuality.

He was drenched, and he stank. He chugged down water.

The image of the prisoner at the tunnel's end didn't leave him. He turned from the viewscreen and saw him still, upright and steady on the chair, hands at the chair's edge. Was the man not as relaxed as he appeared?

Jimmy approached the viewscreen and saw what he hadn't seen before.

Five of the BrightLine employees sat in the weapons room, heavy black uniform shirts and protective vests off, all wearing the same gray tank tops, breaking down weapons. "Mr. Quarles," Jimmy began.

The other men gave Quarles a look; he licked his lips. "Just Quarles."

"Quarles. Would you take a look at something with me?"

"Need some other men, LT?" asked Covey, turning from a locker.

"I just need Quarles." Quarles stood. "It's about the screen." Covey gave Quarles the nod.

Jimmy had left in place the viewscreen's image: looking down from a ceiling corner, focused on the bed, skewed forty-five degrees from true.

"I take it that's not what you wanted," Quarles said.

"I took a stab."

Quarles tapped the center of the screen several times, and the standard image appeared. The old man sat cross-legged before them.

"What do you need?"

"I need to magnify down where his feet are."

"You draw a box," said Quarles. He put his finger to the screen and, a lime-green line following his finger's path, drew a rectangle enclosing the prisoner's feet. The box remained when he withdrew his hand; when he tapped the box, the image within expanded to fill the screen, black bars along the top and bottom. The image initially appeared hazy. "Give it a—" Quarles said, and the picture sharpened.

"Do you see that?" Jimmy touched the screen and jerked his hand away, leaving a green smudge by the prisoner's left foot.

Quarles moved his face closer. "I'm not—what are you seeing?"

"What's this look like from the side?"

Quarles restored the original image. "What side?"

"His left."

Open palm on the screen, Quarles pulled to his left, and the image rolled away to be replaced by a side angle. "Same spot?"

"From the foot on back. Can we get lower?"

"I think there's a camera down there."

Quarles made a two-fingered gesture that brought up a menu. After some manipulation, the image shifted so the view was at floor level, from one of the front corners. Again Quarles constructed a box and again he made it huge.

"His butt's not on the floor. Is it?"

Quarles stepped back. "What, you think he's *floating?*"

Lt. Col. Oblonski had said a man with mental powers could float. He could phase through a wall. He could summon rain. Though Jimmy's own abilities defied standard scientific descriptions, even he felt such scenarios were not credible.

"No. Look. He's pushing with his . . . I guess his calves? His ankles? The sides of his feet are touching, but nothing else is."

"What's that mean?"

"It means walking to the toilet isn't his only exercise."

10. From the Sky

Never a coffee drinker, Jimmy witnessed with some envy the obvious pleasure it provided to the other patrons of the cafe. He had stayed overnight in an upstairs room overlooking the sinkhole—he was pretty sure he heard a cat fall in at one point, pretty much the only sound after businesses closed along the impassable street—and now was seated at the scene of yesterday's interview, wondering whether he could discern a next step.

After her rescue, stunned and soaked, the teacher had sat on the sidewalk with other people until the EMTs arrived. "It's possible I exaggerated," she conceded. "Maybe the door was already off before he got to it. There was a wrenching metal sound. You know the sound. *Grrronnnk*. And then this tremendous *SNAP!* like something breaking. And, *zoop!*, he pulled me up out of there. When you encounter something unexpected, your mind tries to construct a meaningful narrative—even if the narrative seems crazy."

He knew what she meant. He had paid for her dessert.

Inch-thick bread for the two slices of French toast soaked up the syrup quickly. He poured more and observed a man at another table, jaw sunk below his shirt collar, delicately sip his coffee, plump thumb and index finger pincering the mug's handle. The man peered with great intensity at the television mounted high in the diner's front corner. Jimmy cut another chunk with his fork's edge.

"That's weird." The man sipping coffee had spoken. Jimmy followed his attention to the television. He saw heavy fog—evidently the end of a weather report—followed by the image of a human-high white boulder. The reporter called it a "hailstone."

"*Very* weird," the other man said.

"What was that about?"

Without turning his head, the man said, "Those folks got hailstones the size of *cars*."

"And fog?"

"Those were *clouds*. The weather woman said the clouds came down *to the ground*. And then they turned to water. That's as crazy as what happened here!"

Someone had left the morning's newspaper on the counter. Ferrisburg, Maryland, had had a spectacularly unstable day. Lives were lost. But a rescuer no one knew had moved among them. And, reportedly, he had not been alone.

Jimmy rushed through his breakfast, regretting at the last bite that he hadn't asked for coffee after all. He felt himself moving toward a precipice from which he might never return to recover what was, in haste, set aside.

Back by the bathrooms, duffel between his feet, he used the payphone. He hadn't brought the phone number of Bekka's friends, but perhaps she had headed home.

An overly subdued version of her voice said, "I'm not here. Please leave a message."

"I'm not coming back yet," he said. "I found out . . . there's another . . ." He could not formulate an explanation. "I'm sorry. Please don't give up on me. Not yet, anyway."

He had re-parked his car last night in a proper parking spot, under an electrical wire that ran between buildings. Birds had, evidently, spent their morning above his car roof. Berries must have been for breakfast.

He pulled the slender atlas from under the passenger seat. Ferrisburg was so close to the Pennsylvania border, he didn't have to flip pages. Two hours, and he'd be there.

Jimmy slowed to exit as the highway curled between the rooftops of Ferrisburg, a city of red brick and narrow streets. Fresh black stripes on the Jersey barriers showed where cars had veered in the sudden obscurity, and taillight and plastic bumper bits littered the pavement. Jimmy took the exit marked BUSINESS DISTRICT and dipped toward town.

The breadth of the disturbance came immediately into view, with detour signs routing traffic from the ramp around a four-story building whose façade had collapsed. Bricks lay across a street marked off with yellow police tape. He saw other damaged buildings and cars, though he judged that some of the debris had been removed. Where the traffic turned back toward the town's uninspiring, sooty midsection, a narrow boulevard with banks on two corners, Potomac Edison trucks lined the curbs. Jimmy pulled into a combination gas station and supermarket.

He immediately felt unwell when he opened the car door. Dense with humidity, the sky rendered the sun futile, bearable to look at. He undid one more button on his shirt, the same shirt he'd worn to dinner two nights ago. It clung to his back.

Rather than heading directly toward the scene where yesterday's chaos seemed to have been concentrated, he entered the gas station's shop. A cardboard sheet took the place of one large window.

The damp young man behind the counter said hello and scratched at his spotty brown beard. The store was cool enough, but the clerk's forehead dripped, and dark stains swelled on his T-shirt.

"That happen yesterday?" Jimmy asked.

"I's standing right here." The man leaned across the counter and aimed one arm. "A hailstone the size of my *head* bounced off the hood of a car and came crashing *right* in." With his hand, he traced the projectile's trajectory.

"Wow."

"Someone coulda been killed. I heard someone was, downtown."

A mother with two pre-schoolers approached the counter, pausing to see whether Jimmy was finished talking. The girl looked to be a year older than the boy; the two held hands, swung their arms in unison, and stared at the backs of their mother's legs.

"You go ahead," said Jimmy.

He thought to collect some provisions, and saw peanuts behind him on a rack. At the far end of the store, he took a tall can of iced tea from the cooler. When the mother and children left, the opening door chimed.

Jimmy set his purchases on the counter. "I wonder if you can help me out. I'm following up on reports of . . . strangers who came to the rescue during all the action yesterday."

"You a reporter?"

He hesitated. "I'm not. I'm just interested in events like this." He put on a look of sincere disappointment. "I can't go into it," he said, hoping the elusive answer suggested significance.

The young man said, "'kay," and typed at the register.

"Did you see any of these unfamiliar people? Especially an old man, a very old man. He might have been with a group, helping out?"

"No one I didn't know came through here." He stopped typing. "That'll be four forty-seven." Jimmy thumbed through his wad of loose bills for a five. "My uncle's restaurant took a beating. A car plowed right into it. I don't get not at least slowing down when you can't see the hood of your own car. And those hail . . . boulders or whatever, it's like they went after that block in particular. Pretty bad deal."

Reasoning that any connection would at least lead him to a person with a story to tell, Jimmy got directions to the uncle's restaurant. He left the car behind and set off in the shimmery heat, his dark arms instantly slick.

A man and a woman stood outside the building in question, a brick building with two entrances on the street, one of which had been left doorless and demolished. He could see a bar beyond the ragged hole. The couple, both with close-cropped white hair, both of the same height and roundly built, stood in the paltry shade alongside bulging white trash bags piled against the wall.

"We're closed," the man said, making the woman cackle with laughter and slap his pale arm. He remained straight-faced. "Try back at dinner." She stomped her foot this time to accompany her laughter.

"Sorry, honey," she said to Jimmy.

"You've got a good attitude."

"I," said the man, "have no attitude at all."

"Pff!" objected the woman. "All you got is attitude."

"Building inspectors are checking to see if we can even go back in," the man told Jimmy. "It didn't fall on us while we were hauling out this lot." He indicated the trash bags.

"Only so much can go wrong all at once," said the woman, and set her mouth in a line.

Neither questioned Jimmy's curiosity about the previous day's events. As it turned out, they had seen the man himself.

"We all saw 'im," said the man.

"Who's 'all'?"

He waved a hand about vaguely. "All of us standing here when the clouds all a sudden turned to water. And there were two other fellas with 'im. One guy had these

funny eyeglasses. So thick you could see from twenty yards away that it made his eyes huge."

"The other one was missing a ear."

The man turned with exaggerated slowness and regarded the woman. "Where do you get this stuff?"

"I'm telling you. You weren't standing where I was standing."

"I was practically wearing your blouse."

Face squinted shut in a silent paroxysm of laughter, the woman slugged her companion's shoulder.

A tremendously large beetle emerged from among the trash bags, but when it reached the sunlit portion of the sidewalk, it veered back toward the wall.

"Other people helped," said the man. "We helped. We helped the man who drove into our front door. That was quite a surprise!"

The woman threw her hands up at the recollection. "Jee-miny Christmas!"

"What else can you tell me about this group of people?"

The man said, "One of them, not the older gentleman, was carrying a machine. Ran off with it."

"What sort of machine?"

"I'nt know. Some boxy thing."

"How would you describe the older man?" Jimmy had left his book in the car.

"Tall," said the woman, who was peering inside the building now at the sounds of a discussion among the unseen inspectors. "Maybe a Northern accent."

"I'd say he was a Latin . . . Latino fellow."

The woman turned back. "I thought he looked like Father Michael up at the church. What is he, Lebanese?"

"I could sorta see that."

The woman gave this a satisfied and considered series of nods, her eyes looking about as if she were comparing visible evidence.

"So they just drove off?"

"Um," said the man, and he and the woman looked sideways at each other.

"Go 'head," she said.

"It did look like a car, but it went straight up. Like on the end of a bungee line."

"That's a good description," said the woman.

"I saw it go up from that alley just there. Makes you think about where flying saucers come from. Are you investigating that? Maybe you don't know what all strange things have transpired here. We're kind of famous for another hailstorm. What, eighty or so years ago?"

"My granpap used to talk about it."

"It was record-sized hail. The size of a fist."

"So much for *that* record."

The man said, "If you're investigating this, you should talk to BL. I saw BL talking to that older fellow."

"BL?"

"Bob Law. Always gone by BL."

The woman, still looking through the blasted entrance, nodded. "His folks called him BL."

"I seen him walk around the corner with the old guy. Was there for a minute."

"Do you think BL would talk to me?"

"Oh, sure. He down the street at the *ga*-rage."

Leaving them, Jimmy wondered if he and Bekka would grow to look like each other; then it struck him that the couple might have been brother and sister.

As Jimmy entered the glass-fronted office, the man at the shabby desk behind the counter tore open four packs of sugar at once, then commenced emptying their contents into his short cup of what appeared to be coffee. His black hair ranged about his head like weeds and hung in his face, and he did not look fully awake.

BL did not acknowledge Jimmy's arrival. "Excuse me."

The man plunged his index finger into the cup and stirred. "Be right with you." His deep voice seemed reluctantly tugged from his chest.

"I'm not here for business. I was talking to those folks who own the restaurant that was damaged."

"The Stookeys. That's Stookey's Restr'nt."

"Sure. Anyway. They said you might know the elderly man who showed up in town during yesterday's events."

"Hm." He finally withdrew his neglected finger and sucked it. "I'm not sure who you mean."

"There was a man, an old man, tall, dark-complected. He had companions."

"I don't think I can help you." Furtively, from behind strands of hair, BL met his eyes.

"Perhaps," Jimmy said, and steadied his voice. "Perhaps you picked up some idea about where he was going."

BL took a longer pause this time, yet repeated, "I don't think I can help you."

"That's not the same as saying you don't know anything."

"That, my friend, is an accurate statement. Why are you so interested in this . . . old man?"

"I knew him—That's about all I can say. I spent some time around him. Recently."

"And what did you call him?"

"Beg pardon?"

"By what name," and he paused to sip his coffee, "did you refer to him?"

"We didn't have exactly one name."

"I'm talking 'bout you." He set the coffee down with what appeared to be precision, as if the cup had a place to which it must be returned. That done, he settled his hands in his lap and gave Jimmy his full attention. "What'd *you* call him?"

"Methusaleh."

"Methusaleh."

"I really can't explain further." Jimmy heard himself echoing the other man's resistance.

The hair over BL's eyes twitched when he blinked. "I'm afraid you're wasting your time," he said at last. "Or I'm wasting yours, is another way of seeing it."

At the loose-fitting door, Jimmy spun the knob, then said, over his shoulder, "What *should* I have called him?"

Car door open to let out the heat, Jimmy sat with one foot on the blacktop, pointlessly contemplating the piece of cardboard that crookedly sealed the shop window. BL appeared beside him as if winking into existence at that moment.

"Studdard, Georgia," he said.

Jimmy gripped the steering wheel in surprise.

"Sorry." BL appeared amused. He blinked against his hair. "I'm letting you know something I believe you ought to know."

"What are you—wait, what did you say?"

"Studdard, Georgia. Unless the Old Man is mistaken. Any clue could be misread." Jimmy didn't move. "Well, that's it," BL said, and as he turned to go, he parted with what might have been a salute. Keys, a grape cluster's-worth of them, jangled from a belt loop. He had, somehow, approached Jimmy without them making a sound.

11. Prison Walls

Weston stood with her fist at her lips, one arm propping the other, to watch a series of proofs play out on the wall-sized screen. Leaning against the door, glowering, Covey moved his massive jaw from side to side ruminatively. Quarles had helped Jimmy assemble video clips that moved both at Methusaleh's pace and an accelerated pace that made his motions more clear.

Weston said "I'll be damned" early on, then held her silence.

"So," said Jimmy when the presentation was complete, not sure whether he needed to say anything more.

Weston spoke across her fist. "Why did no one notice this before?"

Jimmy hesitated.

"He got sloppy," Covey said. "He's old."

"There goes your depression theory," Weston said to Jimmy, lowering her hand.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And there goes any notion that this man's not still a threat," Covey said, pushing away from the door. Jimmy noticed him adjust his protective vest, the man obviously thinking that force might be needed, that anything was possible.

"He's stayed fit all this time," Weston said. "And he's stayed sharp. With what aim in mind? Escape? Overpowering the guards? Is there anything else we've missed?" She kept her head moving to include all three of them in her questioning. "Coded messages? To whom? Is there any possibility he's palmed anything? A utensil or a container from the MREs? Something from his bedding?"

"We could take it all away," Covey said.

"I'm not comfortable with that. That's not a path we're going down."

Quarles said, "Pardon me, ma'am, but he walks through the scanner on the way to the yard, and we search the room during his showers."

"I want body cavity searches," she said.

Covey nodded. "We can do that."

"I'm adding a fourth man to the security detail when he goes outside. Two dogs at all times, not just randomly. Keep them close to him. I also want some increased checks on our perimeter. And not a word about any change in front of him. Let him think he's got us fooled."

"Won't the extra security indicate something?" Jimmy said.

Weston, hands on hips, looked at the floor. "Yeah, probably. And we have to assume he's caught sight of you, so he knows something's different. But I can't maintain the status quo." She said to Jimmy, "Good work. Does this alter your approach, Lieutenant?"

"Actually, this is helpful," said Jimmy. "It's . . . informative." He now had more words with which to approach the old man waiting at the passageway's end. Yes, what he had learned fit with the existing notions: *powerful*, *in control*, *hidden*. He was all of those, in ways they had not fully understood. The true mistake, Jimmy realized, was to see him constrained, managed, confined . . . in prison. He had never been imprisoned.

Methusaleh lay on the floor, arms at his side. Jimmy used the computer to track down something he had read in high school. Enough of the phrasing came to him to enable a quick search. From Thoreau's essay "On Civil Disobedience," he read:

> . . . as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating

> which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way.

The background on Methusaleh suggested he had countless people to assist him down through the decades. Still strong, still planning, his goals intact, the man might assume that his work continued. Like Thoreau, who knew his ideas extended beyond the walls, he wouldn't think of himself as locked up. Further, Jimmy saw the exercise, the silence, as preparation: He was waiting for a chance. To do what?

He read on.

> I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar.

Jimmy looked about his own room. Dimmed, it felt smaller than the room on the viewscreen—smaller, even, from one moment to the next.

He left the room, went along the corridor past Weston's office, waved at the security camera by the front doors, and when the doors opened onto the front walk and the resting desert beyond the fence, he felt that at last he could take in breath. He stepped out of the building's shadow into the day's mild heat. Face toward the blank sky, he shut his eyes and turned sunward. Taking in another breath, he felt the sun's warmth enter him. Heat entering his nostrils, pink light all he saw, a necessary and expanding silence entered his cells, the vast sky finding a home in his body.

This lasted until the guard at the main gate, fifty meters off, sneezed dryly, the sound whipping across the distance and ringing metallically from the cement walls at Jimmy's back. He returned to his body and felt ready for another attempt at reaching the old man.

In the observation room, he found the prisoner gone. After an unsettling moment, he went to the security station. Quarles turned from the wide windows. "They told me you'd stepped out," he said.

"Needed some air," Jimmy said. Outside, Methusaleh stood at the hub of a wheel of four men and two dogs. He drifted to his knees like an object falling in low gravity. His head slowly pitched earthward.

Quarles cleared his throat. "In about an hour we're playing some ball. Sound good? Two on two."

"Thanks. I think . . . I think I need to stay focused."

"You change your mind, just show up. You think he's secretly exercising right now? Is that some kind of exercise where you put your head on the ground? He's not *standing* on his head."

Jimmy's own head still felt full of the warm, expansive space beyond the prison. Vaguely, not trying, not even willing it, he reached toward the old man, maintaining the idea of the passageway but not opening it just yet.

Quarles said, "I read about guys in Vietnam, prisoners of war? One guy had a Bible smuggled in and he committed to memory the entire book of Luke. Whole thing. Then he passed the Bible to somebody else and spent the next two years of prison reciting the book back to himself. This other guy memorized the names of all the

prisoners in the compound and went through them in alphabetical order every night. Said he'd been trained to do that. And . . . *and* he'd reconstruct the seating charts from his classes from every school year. Maybe our guy does the same kind of thing."

Jimmy grinned at Quarles, who let one eyebrow nicker up. All the reading Methusaleh must have done. Jimmy imagined his tremendous library, books of every kind; he saw a hand pull a hard-bound book from a high shelf. A mind like his, what might he have committed to memory? His head might be thick with the words of others, providing comfort and encouragement, insight and wisdom. Or images, pictures of the sea depths, roiling with strange fish. The blade-like peaks of mountains. The surface of Mars.

Why had anyone thought these walls could hold him? He could be anywhere he wished.

Radically free, he thought. Here but elsewhere. Pieces of the passageway.

Late afternoon, Jimmy shut his eyes, set aside the physical attributes of his room, and entered the common space he'd already built. The passageway awaited him. He conjured up the prisoner in silhouette, seated and motionless. Jimmy entered the passageway and advanced, telling the prisoner everything he knew of him, probing for connection. When he inhaled, he inhaled their shared experience. Exhaling, he breathed out the words and images that belonged to the man himself, the keys to his character.

A great challenge was to bring no expectations to the process; otherwise, like someone desperately at prayer, Jimmy might hear what he wanted to hear, constructing for himself a voice from the other side of the typically uncrossable barrier from self to self.

The passageway faintly echoed. The mind of the other man whispered back. This was good. Jimmy only listened, hoping to catch a tone of assent on the other side, notes of acceptance, openness—an agreement that Methusaleh would never consciously know had been struck.

Jimmy relaxed more deeply. The passageway became a place of surpassing comfort. Everything felt welcoming.

Then the light at the far end snapped out, and Jimmy came blinking and drymouthed from his altered state.

He didn't know why the assay had ended, but his control had certainly slipped. The prisoner sat just as before. Jimmy rose. Later, Jimmy would probe farther. He knew—with a confidence he had never felt before, not during his training nor his time in Iraq—that a bond was established, that all would be well, that right would triumph and the truth would be revealed.

Evening, and the prisoner, so cunning, thought Jimmy, a man rich in talents and knowledge, once a powerful and secretive force upon the earth, slept. Not long afterward, the lights in the cell automatically switched off. Jimmy, who had learned some tricks from the manual—an unmarked binder stuffed in one of the wall cabinets—switched on the night vision, rendering everything in the next room a grainy green. He zoomed in on the prisoner's back, the man having settled securely into the mattress. For all his cleverness and capabilities, his mind at rest would be defenseless.

The space between them, Jimmy's cautious construct, welcomed Jimmy back. He stood before the screen, hands splayed in open air, eyes shut. He felt forward along the gray passage.

At some point, he became aware of his hands at his sides, his head slumped down. More tired than he had realized, he must have fallen asleep. That would not do.

In the dark room, he banged his hip against the long table when he turned for bed. Yes, he was too tired to properly do his job.

Twice that night, he awoke startled from dreams.

Mouth stuffed with dirt, he twisted through the earth. He felt no panic, though unaware that he was dreaming. This would be his life from now on. There should have been no light, yet his eyes could see the solid rock parting for him as he shifted. He knew he wasn't alone. Others were coming.

He woke with a gummy tongue, tasting bitter stone. He remembered putting a rock in his mouth as a child, hiding a piece of mica from a friend's collection, then spitting it back out.

The second dream—and this he knew to be a dream—placed him in the old man's cell. Seated on a chair, arms bound behind him, perhaps by chains, he stared at the yellow wall, knowing he was watched from the other side—not only by Methusaleh himself, but by a crowd. Obscurely, he saw them, smoky images beyond the barrier, tier upon tier of silent witnesses. How ashamed he felt. He cried in an unaccustomed way, mouth severely downturned, cheeks sore from salt. When he woke, he touched his face and found it dry.

He swore aloud. Above the door hung an old-style analog clock, its white face faintly lambent. Three in the morning. He needed more sleep.

He dreamed and did not wake, turned in his sleep, then dreamed again.

Morning came obscurely, Jimmy waking in the dark, uncertain where he was. Even after he sat up, saw the outline of objects by the clock's spectral glow, and determined his whereabouts, he felt bereft of a context. Not waiting to come fully to himself, he left the room for the bathroom in his quarters.

Splashing water on his face, he remained unresolved, as if he'd not completely solidified from some half-immaterial state. He glanced into his own eyes. He sensed that, prior to waking, he had glancingly seen some insight just before it vanished around a corner. It left him unable to meet his own eyes. Looking aside, he brushed his teeth, washclothed his pits and privates, then left the bathroom to change into fresh clothes, all still stuffed in his duffel, his final tan shirt wrinkled. He frowned at the shirt, but put it on, eager to get back to the passageway. An answer would be waiting there.

No matter the physical position he assumed, the prisoner appeared, shortly after every meal, to nap. After breakfast, cross-legged, he sat facing away from Jimmy. Now relatively adept with the technology, Jimmy placed his palm on the screen, waited till a green image of his palm glowed beneath his hand, then dragged his hand to spin the image, stopping when he reached the view from the opposite side of the room. Shut-eyed, the prisoner's head dipped lower with each moment. Now was the time to work with him. Unhurried, Jimmy pulled the wheeled chair before the screen.

The passageway pulsed with his heartbeat. Each beat moved him closer to the man at the other end. He saw him at rest, chin on chest. *I know you,* he told that still figure. *Your secrets require your silence. Your silence is your integrity. I understand. You want to do what's right.*

The head came up. Small lights appeared in the face: the wetness of the man's eyes. They returned Jimmy's gaze, and it made him halt. He felt the words slip from his mouth and hands and clatter along the passageway like dropped tools.

Jimmy blinked. There sat the prisoner, head down, unchanged.

Jimmy struggled to move his tongue. Desperately thirsty, he drank all of one water bottle, wishing he had ice, feeling the start of a headache.

Seeing himself as if from behind, he thought, *You are patient and open. You listen before you judge. You want only to help.*

He had, it seemed, failed to control his imagination and, again, slipped. He would note this failure, reflect on it, rest, and, in the afternoon, try again.

12. Spooky

Lt. Col. Oblonski oversaw the program for "sensitives." Though a military man, he seemed to Jimmy like the sort who, when he left the service, would never look back. Built of sudden gestures, quick pivots on his heel, and abrupt shifts in volume. Oblonski gave the impression of an ill-contained elemental force. Not the type of soldier to be in charge of a unit—but it was understood that these were desperate times, that the lines had been redrawn, that the enemy was less visible than ever.

They assembled each day in a large shed beyond the base's airfield. All that long winter, this meant humping through thick snow beyond all cleared walkways. Space heaters, their power cords snaking every which way, cluttered the classroom and training rooms like puzzled witnesses. The desks might have been a practical joke, relics from forty years back, each with the wooden top that swung up from beside the nubbly, colorful plastic chair. Discards from decent schools. Most of the team said the symbolism was intentional, that all of them, despite what they'd been told, were castoffs, removed to a marginal space, ignored by the rest of the base.

Oblonski passed around an article on "spooky action at a distance." The piece was written for a general audience, making even the wilder speculations of physicists appear within everyone's mental grasp. Jimmy took away from it that paired particles could influence each other no matter their separation across time or space. It made him think of twins. And since time was only another dimension, it made him think, too, of whether your future self might tug you in its direction, ensuring your destiny.

"You see?" said Oblonski. "The universe is wired this way. Quantum entanglement. Everything's connected."

Lt. Connors, at around forty the oldest woman in the group, said, "Are you suggesting that our 'special abilities,'" she threw up lazy air quotes, "are operating at the *quantum* level?"

"Isn't everything we do operating at the quantum level? Aren't we all just quantum events, circumstances, and accidents at the most minute level all operating together to make a unified being?" When Oblonski got worked up, as he often did, he walked among them and got in their faces. "How do so many disparate cells and chemicals and pathways operate together? Our consciousness creates probabilities out of nothingness. Across numerous unseen dimensions that fold regular space! This," he shouted, slapping his palms to his chest, "is all on the surface. Everything important is going on underneath, deep down, *deep* down. We can't grasp it. But we think you can *do* it."

Connors lifted her head to nod but didn't complete the gesture, evidently concluding, as Jimmy had, that Oblonski hadn't quite made sense. And for all this talk of physics, Jimmy wondered if Connors thought of it, as he did, mystically. But she kept to herself, so they never discussed it.

Taped outside the training rooms, a computer printout in fat letters, centered on a sideways sheet of paper, read ONLY CONNECT. The quote was attributed to E.M. Forster.

"Who's E.M. Forster?" Connors asked, so disdainfully it sounded as though she thought the name was made up.

"British writer," said Oblonski's sergeant major, tugging one unkempt gray eyebrow. "Early twentieth century. Homosexual." They all contemplated the sign as if it went on for paragraphs or required multiple rereadings.

"I doubt this is what he had in mind," Jimmy said.

"Who knows?" the sergeant said. "He wrote some strange things. Writers think wild thoughts. Don't they?"

History, averred Oblonski, provided clarity. He meant to instill in them a commitment to a world made safe through more virtuous methods, methods that required an understanding of another person rather than animosity toward another person. The Inquisition used torture to ruin the body as a way to free the soul, but people would say anything to please their captors and end the pain. The Russians had tried operations that stripped emotion, pain, and will from humans, resulting in self-destructive beings incapable of human reason and self-control. The Chinese process of confession and reeducation created docile citizens no longer able to separate what they said from what they truly believed. In typical American interrogation and psyops techniques, interrogators peeled back a subject's defenses the way you stripped old wallpaper, the destination reached only once every protective surface encountered lay in heaped shreds at your feet. Only the data was important, never the person providing it.

Oblonski assured his unit that their endeavors would be regarded by future generations as humane, nothing like what had come before. They would achieve their aims through understanding—and by helping their subjects find the right path.

Perhaps, Oblonski allowed, the procedure violated the subject's privacy rights. Before such an argument could be made, however, it had to be proven that such a violation had even occurred—and so far, the procedure had drilled in empty wells.

Oblonski proclaimed that the perfect, "clean" scenario afforded no view of the subject, only the knowledge that another human was on the other side of a wall, but even he had to admit that the procedure didn't seem to work that way. "Remote viewing" might have kept the Soviets busy for decades but had never produced credible intelligence.

Comfortably seated in otherwise blank rooms, they practiced constructing conduits between themselves and a subject, usually an enlisted man who was told he was needed for a sleep study; this could be one-to-one or several-to-one, with either multiple sensitives targeting one person or one sensitive aiming to pick up something from a roomful of people. Sometimes two sensitives would try on each other, awake and aware, maximizing the possibilities just so they could see what a successful contact was like. Convinced that relaxation was crucial, Oblonski encouraged them to offer no resistance, to be open to one another, easing the way for the minds to interact. The room stank with the sweat of their rigor. Oblonski complained about it, told them to avoid tensing the muscles. Jimmy's jaws ached after every attempt.

The level of success between each other was about what they had with the volunteers: glimmers, suspicions, a tickle, an impression. Twice during their training, Jimmy thought he had something more.

They labored like people given the task of dismantling and reassembling a mechanism from another planet, with no clear sense of what tools they might need or which, among the ones they already possessed, might prove to be of use. Oblonski came up with the "alien mechanism" analogy; he additionally compared their task to that of a newborn human learning to make sense of language and sight.

"Problem being," he said, "that we evolved to do those tasks. Have humans evolved to tackle this one? You're going to tell us." Oblonski encouraged his charges, gave

them ways to think about themselves and their gifts; however, though himself gifted in ways he alluded to but never discussed, he clearly had no experience treading into this particular and subtle territory.

In the end, Jimmy was among the subset of four trainees who could at least claim that they had "connected." This dispirited group met for one final talk with Oblonski, who, more remote than usual, still insistent but now solemn, stood behind the black, laboratory-style table at the front of his classroom.

"And keep this in mind," he had said in conclusion, leaning both elbows on the table, lowering his head till it nearly touched the surface, then extending his neck beyond the edge, as if he wanted to force this vital truth upon them. "The problem with any tunnel is, it *goes . . . both . . . ways.*"

13. What the Thunder Said

The scent of ionized air drew him outdoors. Jimmy paced the blacktop by the car pool to see the source of the thunder. Cooler air, something in the sixties, blew at him from across the unthinkably blank stretch to the southeast. It would rain soon. Clouds as lightless as the ocean tumbled above Camp Perilous and out to the horizon. Thunder murmured, coughed, crashed. Fat drops struck the tarvia. Reluctantly, drawn to the inclement weather but not wanting to be caught in the open by lightning, Jimmy stepped backward to the door. The fresh air had felt good, and it felt good, too, to be exposed to some change in the weather, some direct indication that the world kept going in its varied ways outside the base, natural processes had not been completely displaced by clocks and video screens, and the world was not divisible into corridors and cells.

Refreshed, focused, intent, he strode the hallways as though they led directly to his passageway. The putty-colored walls seemed products of his imagination. The approach to his door grew narrow. Peripheral sight fell away. Within his diminished vision, his hand rose from a blank place to grasp the door's lever.

What happened next, he observed as if watching a film from a comfortable seat. Though mildly surprised by his actions, he felt assured of their rightness. It was not, he later told his questioners, as if he were watching the behavior of a stranger. It was as if, instead, he finally saw his true self.

14. The Elements

The explosion was followed by a single snap as the hotel window broke, not collapsing, cracked but sustained, and Jimmy propelled himself up and forward so he half-fell off the foot of the bed. Already dressed, he was the first one in the courtyard, but others came foggily and slippered from other doors just after him. He saw light in the air above the downtown and realized he was seeing a fire one street over. The next explosion, only a block away, also along the town's Bavarian-style main strip, all the wakened people saw. The swelling bloom of sound struck the little group and surrounded them. Jimmy felt sweat spread in dots across his back. Then he said aloud, ordering himself, "Move," already moving, while most others, half-dressed, retreated to their rooms.

As he hurried down the sidewalk, downtown residents appeared in flight, while others stood in the doorways between shops. A dozen people came running, spread out across the street, all the same in their fear and desire, like the thirtyish woman whom Jimmy fixed on, her long hair stretched back as if connected to what she fled, wearing a skirt that seemed too long for such a hot day, her arms wildly swinging as if, rather than running, she were falling, batting out meaninglessly at the air in an attempt to undo her descent. Some yards behind her, a boy held the hand of a man who was likely his father, but then he lost his grip on the man's hand and landed sideways on the blacktop. One pickup headed toward the conflagration stopped in the street. Another huge concussion resounded, the thunderous boom rolling down the street and bounding from the buildings like a tremendous cannonball, and the truck eased backward. Jimmy stared. There'd been a fireball in the middle of the road, with nothing to ignite except air.

Jimmy wished Quarles were with him, or, better, the whole team from Perilous Base. He knew enough to pick a still spot, away from the twin flows of people moving—some few toward, most away—to better assess the situation, though if the explosions were as random as they appeared to be, there might be no secure place. Fire behind a storefront on the opposite corner threw light on the pictures of houses and apartments taped inside the window of a real estate office at his back. A blaring klaxon atop a pole summoned firefighters, and Jimmy looked about for signs of cars headed to a station. Then, from behind the storefront opposite, an explosion came, flinging glass into the street, rippling the walkway under him, knocking him from his feet.

In the rapid aftermath of moments, he heard panicked sounds, but they might have come from any direction. He didn't panic: the scene was too familiar, though he had never been among civilians when the shelling came, only among people who knew their jobs and went about their business till the riotous time subsided. He sat up. On the ground like this, inactive, only watching, he might have been anyone, another civilian. Putting a hand to a wall, he got up. He had to do something, to help, to prevent further harm.

The fire opposite him surged, and half the building emptied itself into the narrow lane beside it. A man's voice, clear above the clatter and roar, made a sound of anguish. Jimmy ran toward it.

The only light came from the fire within the building at his side, though now that the building had given way, the fire seemed subdued, faintly crackling on the lower floor. Jimmy kicked aside smoldering wood, stumbled, then stopped to listen. A voice formed a pained syllable, and Jimmy moved forward again. Past the debris, a slender man lay on his back, easily visible in what looked to be a white or yellow suit.

Clearing a space for himself, he knelt. The man's left arm had perhaps been caught in the blast, the sleeve shredded, his hand soot-black. The hand clutched a stick. "I'll flag down an ambulance," Jimmy said.

"No need," said the man, who coughed and moved to rise. As he did so, Jimmy caught sight of eyeglasses on the ground near one shoulder.

"Your glasses," Jimmy said. A white scratch crossed one absurdly thick lens. He aimed to restore the spectacles to the man's face, but he began collapsing backward, and Jimmy moved, instead, to support him. He tucked the glasses in the man's interior coat pocket.

"Tried to disable it," the man said, speaking directly upward. "Took too long."

"What's that?"

"Make sure," he said, but then appeared uncertain about the point he meant to make. Jimmy worried the man might be declining into shock.

"Tell me your name."

"Cane." His eyes slid to the side, toward the stick he still grasped.

"Your cane is here," said Jimmy. "What's your name?"

His eyes met Jimmy's. "Call me Cane."

Then the cane wobbled upward as the hand swung it slowly about. The point touched a metal box tumbled amidst bits of siding.

"Make sure," he said.

"Talk to me," said Jimmy. "Tell me something about yourself."

"The work."

"What do you do? What's your job?"

"The work." Jimmy had his hand under the man's head, which kept rolling to the side. Gently, Jimmy turned Cane's long, pale face toward his own. The eyes fluttered. "And a library aide," he said.

The man's other hand lay near his waist, and Jimmy took hold of the slender fingers, the hand shuddering like a small animal struggling to right itself. Cane's grip tightened, and Jimmy reassured him, telling him he'd stay with him, that help was on its way. Jimmy looked plaintively toward the alley's end.

"Neck," the man said. "Necklace." Cane tugged Jimmy's hand. In the faint light, Jimmy wasn't sure what he saw around the man's neck, but assumed it was a medical tag on the necklace, a warning that Cane couldn't take certain drugs. But the object was bullet-shaped, with a blue button at one end. "Press it," said Cane. The button clicked, and when he took his thumb away, the button glowed.

Out on the street, an ambulance went wailing past. Jimmy knew he would have to leave the alley to flag down some assistance.

"Old Man's coming," Cane said, and slipped into unconsciousness. Jimmy felt he had entered one of his too-vivid dreams from Perilous Base. The Old Man. He knew who was on his way.

Lightly, but with enough force to rouse Cane if he could be roused, Jimmy slapped the man's face. He felt for a pulse. He shouted his name. Ideally, the next step was to order anyone else in the vicinity to go for help, and he looked about: he heard, far off, shouts and the groan of engines. Intending to begin compressions, he opened the man's shirt, then saw that something slender had pierced him just below the armpit. Jimmy pressed the shirt to the wound.

Face close in the dim light, he scanned the length of the man's body. Below the knee, the pants had torn, a flap of fabric peeled back to show, in the faint light from the street, another wound.

Jimmy began compressions, one-handed, the other hand pressing against the wound in the side, counting off, pausing, calling to the man. Doing it again. It occurred to Jimmy, in the same way as any good idea arrived at when he was focused on something else, that he might have more than one means available to keep the man alive. He shut his eyes and reached outside himself, thinking, *You found the device*, thinking, half fearing what it meant, *The Old Man is coming.* The walls of the passageway were flung up swiftly, puzzle pieces shaping themselves out of the dark chaos and conjoining. Jimmy called to the figure who stood, one hand gripping a cane, at the far end. *You need to stay with me now. The Old Man is coming. You found a device. What you most want is to stay with me. You want to wake up. You want to see another day. Wait for the Old Man. He's coming.*

Face to face, he stood with Cane. Cane's mouth moved, but no words came out; distantly, Jimmy was aware that he continued to count off compressions. He knew the compressions wouldn't save this man; he knew, too, that as long as they stood in each other's company, Cane wasn't gone. Cane tried to speak. Jimmy knew what Cane wanted to say. Cane was reassuring Jimmy. The Old Man would arrive in time.

"I'll take over," someone said in his ear, and Jimmy was, gently but firmly, lifted

back and set down. The man he'd known as Methusaleh snapped open a black bag, extracted a syringe, and bent over Cane. Another man, small and frail as an adolescent, but with a mature face, put out a hand to offer Jimmy help up, and Jimmy took the hand.

"What did you do here, Lieutenant?" the Old Man asked, not turning.

"I did . . . I made a connection." Uncertainly, he added, "It's what I tried to do with you."

"That's good."

The small man was English. "Nice work, mate," he said. "The Old Man has it from here." Another man stood a few feet off, not watching the proceedings. A disk of unpolished gray metal or plastic covered his left ear and a portion of that side of his bald head. He appeared overdressed for the heat in a loose-fitting camel-colored duster.

A small packet from the bag was slipped under Cane's prone form. Cane's body lifted from the ground as a grayish cushion swelled and expanded beneath him, till finally it supported him head to toe.

"Cane tell you anything?" the Englishman asked.

"He found something," Jimmy said, pointing, not able to elaborate, and the Englishman picked up the metal cube. He turned it, brushing it off.

"How's that look?" the Old Man asked, reaching into his bag again.

"Perfect on the outside," the Englishman said. He told Jimmy, "We destroyed two others. They usually self-destruct. The one we found last time wasn't a complete loss. Helped us know what kind of signal to look for. This one doesn't appear to have immolated itself. Definitely come in handy. Maybe allow us to figure out how to block the signal if there's a next round."

"He likes to explain," said the man in the coat.

A woman's voice came from the near alley entrance. "We got off easy." A slender, tall figure, she put out her arms to balance herself across the rubble till she reached the little group. "There's damage and displaced people, but no one was inj—oh, dammit."

"He's going to be all right," the Old Man said.

"Dammit anyway." Firelight from inside the shattered building lit her face. Jimmy figured she was in her seventies, silvery hair pulled into a ponytail, the tail tugged through the back of a baseball cap. She made a sour face toward the flames. "Anyone planning to put that out?"

The man with the metallic headpiece said with confidence, "More engines are on the way. The building is empty."

The woman poked Jimmy's shoulder. "Who are you?"

"Jimmy Randolph."

The Old Man said, not turning, "He kept Cane alive."

"Thanks for that," she said, her voice low and sincere. "I'm Sully."

"Sally?"

"*Sully*." She indicated the Englishman, still fiddling with the metal box. "That's Reg."

"Only to my most dear friends."

Jimmy said, "What . . . what is happening here?"

"Bubbles of quantum improbability," the Old Man said over his shoulder.

"Things which shouldn't happen," said Sully, "but which are *possible*. Taking advantage of quantum fluctuations. Making them all turn one way at the same time. Resulting in these wild events. My guess here is he caused pockets of oxygen to ignite."

"We're calling him the Improbable Man," said the man in the coat. "Though I don't know why we assume it's a he."

Sully said, "It's a he."

"Maybe we should call him the Historian." Reg directed this to Jimmy. "He put clues in newspapers, clues he meant us to see. All relying on a knowledge of the past, a past he duplicated. The sinkholes occurred in a town that experienced a tremendous mine collapse back in the 1950s. Gas lines broke. Sinkholes manifested. A lot of damage."

"In Maryland," Jimmy said. "Ferrisburg had a record hailstorm decades back."

"Correct. And this place went to cinders in a great fire in 1920."

"But," said the man in the coat, "he's left us no clues about his next attack."

Sully said, "That's Lopez." Jimmy saw the man stiffen. "He's petitioning to be called El Tigre."

For the first time, the man looked at Jimmy. "There's a story of great historical significance to accompany that name."

"Another time," said the Old Man. He rose from Cane, snapping swiftly to his full height. Though perhaps not what he was in his youth, his stature and stance bore grace and power. His face was not how Jimmy remembered it, the eyes more alive, the skin tighter. Here at last was the man who had held his silence all those years, maintained his strength and mental acuity, and waited for opportunities to present themselves. The night having leached away color from the scene, Jimmy might have been staring at a newsreel depicting a hero of a former age.

"Lopez, call the hospital in Demorest. Let them know Dr. White is coming."

Jimmy made a soft, quizzical twitch, and the Old Man conveyed the merest suggestion of a wink.

Reg held out the metal device. "I'm going to need more equipment."

"We'll stop in Atlanta." The Old Man turned to Lopez. "Contact—"

"Donigan."

The big man nodded.

"Sending a message now," Lopez said, though he hadn't moved. Catching Jimmy's eye, Lopez tapped the metallic piece obscuring his ear.

The Old Man bent toward Jimmy. "I don't approve of his enhancements."

"Says the perfected man," Lopez said. The big man gave a grim look. "Someday you'll need reading glasses, Boss."

"Not likely." Without pause, he added, "We don't need further clues. I know what's next. Earth, air, fire . . ."

Sully said, "Come on, really? How would you program such a device? Thematically?"

"Maybe it's a literary device," said Reg.

Sully tugged down the brim of her cap. "I can't believe you said that."

The big man stepped close to Jimmy. He said, quiet but clear, "Best and the brightest." Then, to Lopez, "Where's the car?"

"En route."

A fire engine wailed past the alley's end and continued for a moment more. The truck must have stopped nearby.

With the Old Man still standing close, as close as when a prison wall had kept them apart, Jimmy couldn't help saying, "I wanted to know what you know."

"These people and a thousand others are why you can't know what I know. I have to keep them safe. Or try to keep them safe. Along with all the lives we'll be called upon to rescue. I'm responsible for the well-being of many. Surely you appreciate such a calling."

A wash of air pushed smoke and dirt through the alley, throwing particles into Jimmy's face. When he'd taken away his hands, an open-topped car sat just past the debris.

Reg smiled admiringly. "I'd forever wanted a flying car."

"The future is here," Lopez said. "We had to keep ourselves busy while you were away."

The Old Man gave the vehicle a glance. "It *has* proven its usefulness."

They all, Jimmy included, joined to lift Cane on his mattress into the rear of the vehicle. Sully climbed in back with him and lifted his shirt, inspecting his bandages.

Rather than get in, the Old Man clutched the vehicle's side, standing on a narrow running board. He saw Jimmy's look. "I prefer an open view," he said, as he pulled a cable from beneath the side mirror and hooked it to his belt buckle. "I hope the aftermath wasn't too difficult."

"I—no, it was fine."

"They didn't hold you responsible."

"That's true," Jimmy said, but it felt like a lie, a technical evasion allowing him to believe there was a distance between his will and his actions.

"Good." And as if he understood exactly Jimmy's fractured nature, he said, "Now you have a choice to make, Lieutenant. Stand clear." Jimmy stumbled backward over broken wood, but stayed upright.

The car lifted up on the sound of a thousand startled birds. In moments, it was gone. Jimmy was still looking up when flashing lights fluttered through the alley. Firefighters jumped down from their vehicle. Jimmy steadied his feet, then went out to see whether he could lend a hand.

15. Seen and Unseen

The storm brought steady rain, but no great downpour and no tremendous winds, so the exercise area stayed dry. Lightning ripped down in the distance, never getting nearer than the mesas. The thunder, though: that was the show, protracted and rolling, unhurriedly approaching each final concussion.

Two dogs and four men accompanied Methusaleh. From the first, the dogs seemed off, sniffing the air, distracted, inattentive to commands. Covey didn't like it. He shouted over the thunder, then moved closer to the dog handlers in order to be heard.

"It's the storm," he said. "They don't like it. We should—" he said, when both dogs went for him. "Restrain them!" he shouted, but the dogs were wild, ferocious. The final guard held his ground, attentive, somewhat, to the kneeling, shackled man. Waving toward the security room windows and the camera above Covey, the guard shouted for support. The dogs abruptly settled, Covey got a breath, but they lunged again, tangling their lines, pulling one handler into the other. The final guard moved to secure the prisoner, to hustle the man inside, but then the dogs abruptly turned on him. One broke its handler's hold and ran breakneck over the armed guard, knocking him down, then turning and running over him again. Covey, up against the fence, raised his weapon.

Thunder exploded. In the middle of the yard, the ground gave way before the prisoner's knees. Methusaleh rolled forward and was gone. The dogs suddenly calmed, and Covey and the guard on the ground rushed to the breach. There they hesitated, beginning, it appeared, to kneel before crumpling alongside one another. Covey shrieked (days later, he would say he felt arrows fly into his body) while the other man lapsed, fetal, into moaning (he told investigators he remembered nothing). The dogs observed coolly in the company of their handlers, who shouted uselessly to the fallen men. Why had no alarm sounded? A medical kit was presumably needed. Handing over his dog, one man ran inside.

In the security center, he found Jimmy sitting dazed and unresponsive before blank video screens, the two other BrightLine personnel unconscious on the floor. The man triggered the alarm, but the escape was complete.

For half an hour, all they could get out of Jimmy was the same sentence, again and again: "He's too good." Tears drained down his cheeks as Weston watched him become aware of his surroundings—not like someone waking up but like someone learning to see. Still, he only said, "He's too good."

Weston put a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "Too clever by half," she said. "Still a dozen steps ahead of us."

But that wasn't what Jimmy meant.

Someone guessed at what triggered the reaction in the dogs, but a scan of a wide range of frequencies detected by the outdoor microphones found not only ultrasonic whistles, seeming to have several origination points, but also subaural rumblings around the base, the movements and perhaps communications of whatever had worked from below to set the prisoner free. Had there not been a thunderstorm at the time, someone might have noticed the murmurings underfoot.

Half a dozen armed men, suited against toxic emissions, entered the underground chamber. Three possible routes of egress revealed themselves. By the next day, the army had flown in equipment to provide images of what lay beneath, but those tunnels cut deep and out of range. What signal had the prisoner provided to his underground accomplices so they knew the very moment to enact his release? No evidence remained of the subterranean gasses that had caused the diverse psychological woes affecting the guards (in any case, the effects faded within days).

Jimmy's part in the escape—of which he remembered nothing—was harder to parse, though cameras had recorded his every action, from his rising from his seat as Methusaleh left his cell, to his steady progress down the corridor and into the security center, to the two unaccountably quick and unerring blows that disabled the man and woman at their stations.

Oblonski showed up. They had Jimmy tell his story while Oblonski stood impassively, arms crossed, eyes to the floor, more reflective than Jimmy had ever seen him. When Jimmy had finished, Oblonski waited a beat, said to Weston, "He's telling the truth," and left without a word to Jimmy.

Quarles was in the hall outside Weston's office when she and Jimmy emerged. He asked, "Who was that, General?"

Weston pincered her fingers around her forehead as if in pain. "Our lie detector," she said.

They put him on extended leave and offered him counseling. Flight after flight of soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq needed it more, he truly believed; he'd seen them. But the offer wasn't something to cavalierly refuse, and he knew himself well enough to see he had been broken before, and this had left him in ruins, all the walls pulled down. He spoke more than was his tendency in his counseling sessions, and he got to hear what he thought, and he got to hear the things he'd done. Not bad. Not bad. But he was haunted by the deeds of the man in the cell.

He sat in silence, not calling it prayer or meditation, allowing whatever was deepest in him to surface. He listened to the voices at his center and the nothing surrounding every voice, but he couldn't tell which voice was telling the truth. How does a man interrogate himself?

He recalled himself saying, "He's too good." That was the final key: *Good. Righteous. Just.* And seeing himself as a decent man, as a person devoted to justice, how could he help but work to free the innocent captive?

16. Deeds of the Righteous

The first birds settled at the edges of the wide pools of water left behind by the firefighters. From the bench by a gazebo, in the small green at the center of town, Jimmy could see the last house to have caught fire. Much of the front was gone, given over to a hole extending from the roof down into the first floor as if something the size of a whale had taken a tremendous bite; before dawn, the scene appeared flat and unreal. He wondered again whether another world lay under this one, fully functioning, in cavernous mazes under the earth. Now that he'd seen the car lift into the air and carry off the Old Man and his associates, it was possible to believe anything, hidden realms above the earth as well as beneath, or a secret world running alongside the one Jimmy knew—though Jimmy felt there ought to be limits to how far this fantasy played out. Otherwise, nothing was reliable.

It was too early now, but when he had the chance, he would call Bekka. She, at least, was reliable.

Thematic attacks. A repetition of destructive histories. Fire . . .

Jimmy was tired, so it took him a minute. Earth, air, fire . . .

He knew where to go next. Perhaps it had been too recent, but no violence by water had been more dramatic. Jimmy needed to go where people had been abandoned, where any remaining vision of an intact nation had fallen apart.

He pulled off at a hillside rest stop not far from Montgomery, Alabama. At the parking lot's far end, by a picnic table, trees with enmeshed limbs cast ruffled shade; Jimmy tucked the car there, cracked open the window, tilted back his seat, and slept. The sounds of passing cars and people entered his dreams, but nothing woke him for hours.

He didn't reach New Orleans till the sun had nearly set. The air smelled of water and reproach. He thought, "Haven't these people suffered enough?"

The hotel was in a part of the city that hadn't been flooded, but the owner had fled Katrina well in advance of the storm. A wiry, circumspect man, he told Jimmy as he handed him a key, "I took off again when Rita come along. That one didn't touch nothin' but the Ninth Ward. But I don't take chances with my life."

"That's a good policy," Jimmy said.

"Mm-hm. Playin' it safe with my *one* life," he said. He came around the counter to point across the courtyard. "Over on the left there. Up above. You can park you' car right by those steps. You here to sightsee or you plan to give people some he'p?"

Jimmy heard himself say, "I plan to help if I can."

"They's plenty to do. Be plenty to do for years and years till it all washes 'way agin."

"I imagine so," Jimmy said, and he went to move his car. The day before, stopping briefly in Atlanta, he'd gone online at an internet café and located this establishment. Then he'd placed an ad in the *Times-Picayune*, on the theory that the eyes and ears in service to the great man were multitudinous and ever-vigilant.

"Methusaleh," read the ad, "let me help. Perilous Lieutenant." He named the hotel, and the ad gave an identifying contact number. One way or another, he would get in touch, though the ad felt like a prayer, like the incense of something sacrificed that you hoped would come to the attention of an impossibly distant being.

The room smelled damp and felt damp. Jimmy shook out of his shirt and went into the bathroom. Washing up, he saw a tired figure in the mirror. He put on the light to see him more clearly and, a child again, he leaned toward his own face.

Perhaps it was the phone itself, a relic, a jet black object that possessed real mass,

that made the ringing on the other end seem to come from the past, when the surprise of a distant voice magically bound you to people.

His mother answered.

"Mom, it's Jimmy."

"Let me get your father," she said, and her voice, though averted, became loud. "James!" she called. "It's your son!" Then, returning, "Are you still with that girl?"

"Yeah."

"That's that girl Rayna knew." Jimmy's cousin had hooked them up.

"Bekka, yeah."

"Everything still good?"

"Yeah, yeah. Things are good. We're, uh, we're on a vacation together."

"Mm," she said, and he knew what she thought of that, how it was too fast, but she wouldn't say a thing, just make sounds that told you she was processing the information, judging it, and if you knew her, you knew her judgment.

He heard the rattle and hiss of his father picking up the other phone. "Hey hey!" his father called. "Jimmy!" It rendered Jimmy breathless.

"Hey, Dad," he managed, at the moment not certain of himself but feeling loved and understood.

"You and that girl—what's it, Bekka?—still together?"

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"Yeah. I—"

"We covered that," said his mother. "They're on vacation together."

"Oh, I see, I see. Where are you?"

"Ahm." A fly climbed the spotty red curtain. "Between destinations," he said.

"Why is there something instead of nothing?" He had asked this of Bekka on their first date, walking her home from an old-fashioned burger joint.

She had laughed and said, "You sure move fast. We're already on theoretical physics?" then laughed again at his stammering reaction. "Okay," she said, putting her hand on his upper arm, thrilling him, "I'll tell you what we say we know," and the rest of the way back to the steps of her apartment, she had given him the rundown on the slight edge matter had over antimatter at the creation of the universe, on the latest thinking about the multiverse, on theories she called crazy and ones she said were credible but that still sounded crazy to him, till Jimmy summed it up for her.

"So you don't know."

"I don't care what they say," she said. "Some things can't be questioned. And other things we can't ask."

The phone rang twice, and when she answered, he felt there was a world beyond the madness of this situation.

"Baby," she said, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm . . . I'm where I need to be. I wish I could tell you more, but I've got to keep this close for now."

"You're not in trouble."

"I am not in trouble," he said, tempted to follow up with, "but I'm headed for trouble." He did say, "I promise to stay in touch. If that's what you want. This must feel like I've abandoned you."

"You have important things to take care of, is that right?"

"Yes. Yes, that's right."

"Well," she said, "I know you are a good man."

Across the miles, he felt her voice as a physical force that not only reached him, it altered him, making him the man she deserved.

He had been wrong about the true nature of the self. After showering, he had peered again into the foggy mirror. His nose touched the glass. The man over there was motionless, but in the world at his back, violence and terror ground down ordinary people as if their lives had no purpose but to be pressed under history's terrible weight. Good people could not allow that. There at his back, past that shower wall, past the building, people acted to lift the heel of violence.

You couldn't locate or understand the self by looking inward. You could only make sense of a self by observing its actions in the world. A good human was not a steady noun but a sequence of unexpected verbs. No matter if one sat in contemplation or acted for all the world to see: one became a full self by doing.

Dressed, he sat in the single chair by the bed. An air conditioner labored at his back. He could not stop looking at the door, and after a while, he realized he was trying to see through it to what lay beyond.

Something was coming. A man who intended to bring great harm had come to this city. Another man who intended to stop him—or at least stop his plans—was here as well. In a few moments, Jimmy would leave this room, heading toward the levees, in search of a destructive device or in search of the man he'd called Methusaleh. Or . . .

Or a knock would come. He would open the door. The Old Man would say, "We have to go. Follow me." Jimmy would step out into the fraught and waiting and damaged world. At last he would be free. ❍

SCOUT

Will McIntosh

Will McIntosh recently moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, with his wife Alison and twins Hannah and Miles. Survival at all costs is the theme of his newest short story. "Scout" is based on his novel *Defenders,* which will be published in May by Orbit Books, and has already been optioned by Warner Brothers for a feature film. Will's previous novel, *Love Minus Eighty,* was based on "Bridesicle," which won the Asimov's Readers Award, as well as the 2010 Hugo Award for Best Short Story. The author's debut novel, *Soft Apocalypse,* was a finalist for both a Locus award and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award.

Kai knew better than to look up at the old man behind the counter to see if he was watching. That was a dead giveaway. Instead, Kai tracked him through the reflection in the cold case, which was no longer cold, because it was illegal to waste energy to keep drinks chilled.

The old guy had an underbite that made him look vaguely ape-ish; what gray hair he had was combed straight back in thin lines. He was watching Kai, frowning, suspicious. Kai knew he looked like a hungry kid who had no one taking care of him, but he couldn't help it; he couldn't find it in him to relax the scowl, to smile. This was also one time Kai's size was probably a liability. Mom used to say he looked sixteen, not thirteen.

A wave of pain washed over him as he thought of his mom. Right now he didn't even feel thirteen—he felt more like eight. He wanted his mommy, wanted her to rock him while he pressed his face against her long, soft hair. That's all most kids wanted since the invasion began. There were no tough kids left, only scared kids. And desperate kids, like him.

The door to the convenience store creaked open; a chubby woman with a tattoo on her shoulder stepped in and went to the counter. Kai seized the opportunity, snaring three fat pieces of jerky and stuffing them under his jacket, pinning them under his left arm.

He rose, spent a moment looking at the drinks in the cold case, most of them homemade, the corporate logos printed on the bottles partially covered with white handwritten labels. Hurrying was another dead giveaway. He paused again on his way to the door, watched a news feed playing in 3-D above the front counter for a moment.

It was war footage of half a dozen Luyten storming a fusion plant. You almost never saw so many in one place. They were guerilla fighters; they lost some of their advantage when they clustered together, so when they attacked in force it usually meant they'd identified a target that was poorly defended.

Kai was repulsed by the sight of them—giant starfish, faceless, silent. Two were flying in their weird form-fitting six- and seven-pointed craft, while the rest were on the ground, galloping on three or four of their limbs, mostly staying behind vehicles or trees for cover, their free arms firing lightning bursts. Human soldiers were shooting wildly,

knowing there was no point in taking aim, because the Luyten would just pluck their intentions out of their minds and evade the shot. If the soldiers had larger weapons—flame-blasters or 360 clusters—they'd have a chance. Then again, if they had larger weapons the Luyten would have known, and wouldn't have attacked in the first place.

When he couldn't stand to watch any more, Kai headed toward the door.

The old guy moved from behind the counter with surprising speed, beating Kai to the door, brandishing a stun gun.

"I didn't see it, but I know you've got something." He waved the gun. "Open your jacket."

Kai wanted to tell the man he had no right to search him just because he looked filthy and tired, but it was pointless to argue. He reached into his coat and pulled out the jerky.

The chubby woman with the rose tattoo tisked, shook her head. She'd moved over to watch.

"I'm a good kid. It's just, my parents were killed when Richmond got overrun, and I don't have anywhere to go." In a shrill, childish whine he added, "I'm so hungry."

The old guy plucked the jerky from Kai's outstretched hand. "I don't doubt what you're saying. Times are hard." He gestured toward the road with his chin. "Check with Refugee Services, see if they can give you some food."

"Refugee Services is *closed*. It's been closed since I got here. Please, let me have one?"

The man shook his head brusquely. "I can't hand out food to everyone who's hungry." He gestured toward the door.

Kai looked out into the dark, frigid, rainy night. The rain ticked against the storefront window; it was turning to sleet. He turned back. "Can I at least stay in here to keep warm? I won't take anything, I promise."

The man looked pained. "I can't. I'll lose my job if I do."

Kai pushed the door open, tucked his chin against the cold. Empty hands buried in his jacket pockets, he hurried down the street, weaving to find a path through the piles of trash, most of it electronics that didn't work, or took too much energy to operate. In the street vehicles whooshed silently past, but only occasionally, nothing like traffic had been before the invasion began.

He wasn't sure where to go. He turned left at the end of the block to get off the main artery, passed apartment buildings, eyeing warm yellow lights inside windows covered with security mesh. Kai longed to be in one of those apartments, in a warm bed, but none sported the green sash that indicated refugees were welcome. They were all full, or, more likely, the families inside were ignoring President Wood's plea to open their homes to people fleeing the Luyten.

The problem was, there were a lot more refugees now. Before Richmond fell, refugees had poured into the city as the starfish seized more and more of the outlying areas, and Kai and his family had done what they could to help them, like they were supposed to. Kai had shared his clothes with the refugees who were his age, brought them along to hang out with him and his friends. He could still remember how proud his mom was, how she smiled whenever he did something nice for one of the scared, shrunken kids who came down the road pulling a suitcase. Now that Kai was a refugee, there were just too many for that sort of kindness. Washington was packed with refugees.

It was so hard, getting used to each thing that was taken away. First, communication, when the Luyten took their satellites out. No way to speak to Grandma, or to Pauly, who'd been his best friend until last year. No way to pop into school via screen, when schools were still open. Then, as the Luyten choked off the routes between cities, no toothpaste, no food that arrived at the table ready to eat. Then the Luyten gained control of most of the solar and wind farms, the fusion and nuclear plants, and there wasn't enough power to run the house AI, or Kabuki, his personal AI.

Now he had no warm bed, no food to eat at all.

He was heading away from the makeshift shanty camp where he'd stayed the past three nights. The camp was too far to reach in the cold and dark; he'd walked too far, trying to find a store where a clerk might be less vigilant of theft than the ones nearer the camp.

His toes were already numb, his shoes soaked from puddles he couldn't see.

He wished he had someone with him. Anyone. If he could pick one person who was still alive, it wouldn't be one of the cool friends he'd started hanging out with in the last year, it would be Pauly, who he'd known forever. Scrawny, goofy Pauly, who Kai had pretty much dropped, for no good reason. Mom had been disappointed in Kai when he ditched Pauly. She'd told him you don't throw away friends.

What he wouldn't give to have Pauly walking beside him right now. Kai wondered where he was right now, what he was doing.

There was an old brick and concrete building ahead, three separate dark, open bays of what must have once been an auto body shop, or a fire department. The building must have been a hundred years old. It had been a long time since things were built out of brick.

The first bay was nothing but a concrete floor, providing shelter from the rain, but little relief from the cold, gusty wind. There was a door sitting slightly ajar, up three concrete steps along the wall. Even if it was a tiny toilet room, it would be warmer, at least.

The door squealed when Kai nudged it open. The room stank of cigarettes. A woman was curled up in one corner of what had once been an office. She was partially covered by a corner of the wall-to-wall carpet, which she'd peeled up from the floor. In the faint light, Kai took in her swollen face, matted hair, her bulging, empty eyes, wide open and unblinking. He swung the door closed with a cry of disgust.

Skin prickling, he scurried down the steps and out of the bay, back into the biting rain.

There were two more bays. Kai didn't like the thought of being so close to a dead body, but he was shivering uncontrollably from the cold. He couldn't keep going. What were the odds he'd find another abandoned building?

There was a door in the second bay, but it led to a bathroom, not an office. The third and final bay had no inner doors at all, so Kai returned to the second, gathered up what scraps of paper he could find, along with a small cardboard box, and returned to the bathroom.

The room smelled dank, with an undertone of dried urine. Still shivering, Kai pulled a half-used roll of toilet paper off the dispenser and used it to dab his wet clothes. It wasn't much help.

The room was too small for Kai to stretch out, so he curled his legs in, used a wadded-up juice carton as a pillow, piled the trash over his legs as best he could. It still felt strange to fall asleep gradually, rather than having sleep induced by his AI. He missed Kabuki almost as much as he missed Pauly, though not nearly as much as he missed his mom. He knew Kabuki wasn't real, was nothing but a bunch of chips designed to say pleasant things and follow directions, but he'd been a part of Kai's life for as long as he could remember.

Kai was freezing. He couldn't stop shaking; his hissing breath echoed off the half-tiled walls.

An image flashed, of the woman in the next bay. She must have frozen to death, maybe last night. And she had a carpet.

There was a draft whistling through the space where Kai had left the door open a crack. It would be warmer if he closed it, but he would lose the sliver of grey light. He didn't want to be in the pitch dark.

He couldn't understand how this was happening. A week ago he'd been in his warm

bed in Richmond; his mother had tucked him in, told him not to worry about Dad, who was with his brigade less than forty miles away between Richmond and the Luyten surge. A day later he was on a bus roaring down I–95 packed with kids and old people.

There was no point in crying, but he couldn't help it. The sound of his own crying made him feel worse. What was he going to do? Why wouldn't anyone tell him what to do, where to go?

Did you smell?

Kai cried out, jolted upright. He hadn't thought the words, they'd just come, raking through his head like steel fingernails on glass.

She's smoke. Lighter.

Kai clamped his palms over his ears. His soaked pants were suddenly warm; he was vaguely aware he'd wet himself.

Build fire.

It felt like there was something crawling around in his head. Kai sat frozen, trembling, praying it wouldn't happen again.

Or you die.

Kai howled in terror. He didn't understand what was happening to him.

Happening to you. Kai. Freezing.

His teeth were chattering; his whole body was shaking from the cold, from fear. The voice went on, about the cold, about Kai dying, about fire. There was enough trash around to burn, but he had nothing to start a fire.

She's smoker. Lighter.

A lighter was what he needed.

You dead this morning. Do you Kai?

The voice had asked him something. Kai was afraid if he didn't answer, the voice might get angry, might do something to him. Drive him crazy, pull him down into whatever dark, awful place it came from. Something about the voice was so terribly wrong, so profoundly *off*. It was as if the words were jagged, scraping the inside of his head.

You do?

"No. I don't want to be dead," Kai said aloud, the volume of his own voice in the tight space making him flinch.

She smoked. Lighter.

Maybe he was already crazy. This was just what it was like, wasn't it? Voices in your head?

Lighter. Her pocket.

Kai jolted. Her pocket. Suddenly he understood what the voice was saying. She smoked. The dead woman smoked. He'd smelled smoke in there, hadn't he? The voice was telling him there was a lighter in her pocket.

Yes.

He didn't want to go back in that room. She was dead; her eyes were bulging—

Or you die. Go.

Kai shoved the door open, peered into the bay, half-expecting to see something crouching there, waiting for him, but there was nothing but concrete, shadows, the howling wind.

Hunched against the wind, Kai marched into the next bay, his heart in his throat. He climbed the steps, put his hand on the knob, twisted it partway.

Maybe the voice lived in the bathroom. Maybe if he didn't go back it couldn't get him, couldn't talk to him—

Wrong. Go on.

Kai gripped the handle tighter. It was ice cold. He twisted it, pushed the door open a foot.

There she was. He pushed the door open further, took a step into the room. She

was old, maybe sixty, Hispanic or maybe Indian. The tip of her tongue was jutting from between her blue lips.

He didn't want to do this; he'd rather freeze to death than stick his fingers in her pocket and feel her body. Would it be squishy or stiff?

The voice was silent, but he knew if he waited it would speak to him again, would tell him to get the lighter. It might even yell at him. That would be awful. He had to do it. Quickly—as quick as he could. Kai's breath was coming in rattling gasps. He took a deep breath and held it, stood paralyzed for a moment.

Do it.

The voice was like a shove at his back. Kai scurried to the body, squatted.

Other one, the voice said before Kai even had time to lift his left hand. He reached with his right, slipped two fingers into her pocket.

Her hip felt stiff through the denim of her jeans. It didn't feel as bad as he'd feared, but it was still bad. He felt the pointed tip of the lighter, but couldn't reach it.

Pull her flat.

That would mean touching her, really touching her. Kai so desperately didn't want to do that.

Whimpering, he scooted back, grasped her feet by her tattered shoes, squeezed his eyes closed. As soon as he pulled, the shoes slipped off. His belly roiling with disgust, he half-flung, half-dropped them, then grasped her spongy, swollen ankles and *pulled.*

The body slid forward inch by inch, then suddenly her head lolled to the left and she dropped, hard, to the floor. Not thinking, just wanting to get it over with, Kai shoved his hand into her pocket, closed his fingers around the long, thin lighter.

A moment later he was in the bay, running.

Trash for fire.

The voice was right—this bay had much more trash than the others. Kai ran around picking up as much as he could carry before returning to the second bay.

Moments later, he had a small fire burning. The heat felt marvelous on his fingers, his cheeks, his nose. The orange light pushed back the shadows and the darkness, made a place that was *his* in a way he couldn't put into words.

Better. Yes. Collect more trash.

Kai did as he was told, checking the last bay and returning with another armful of trash, set it in a pile near the fire.

Now sleep. I'll watch you for danger.

The voice was horrible, but the words were reassuring, and they were growing clearer, less grating. Kai lay down, closed his eyes. He was so tired.

It would watch over him. How would it watch? Where were its eyes, Kai wondered?

He was drifting off, his front side warm, his back and feet still stiff with damp cold. The voice would watch over him.

Kai jolted upright, suddenly knowing whose voice it was.

I won't hurt you.

They knew what you were thinking. But Kai had never heard of one *speaking* to someone. Never. Not on the news, not from anyone.

We can if we want.

It heard everything he thought. There was no way for Kai to stop thinking, no shelter from it. It was in his head. They could read your mind until you were a few miles away. Kai pressed one hand to the cold ground. He had to—

If you run, I will hurt you.

Kai froze, a trickle of dread running through him.

"Where are you?" he whispered.

Close.

Kai sat utterly frozen, afraid to move, afraid to breathe.

Sleep.

Kai pried the flagstone loose from the walk that meandered through the church's walled garden. The small, square key was underneath, just as the Luyten said it would be. He plucked it from its hiding spot, headed for the back door of the church.

Not there. Back the other way. Walk along the wall.

Kai did as he was told, his mouth watering with anticipation despite the wild guilt he felt. A *church*.

There was a small graveyard set inside a low, ornamental fence. Ivy covered the fence and crawled along the ground.

There. Behind the statue.

Behind a mold-stricken statue of an angel with spread wings was a raised concrete circle with a steel cover. Looking around first, though it was probably unnecessary, Kai approached the cover, inserted the key into the hole, and pulled the hatch open.

The cover lifted fairly easily, revealing a dark hole, a ladder leading down. Kai climbed to the bottom, a dozen or so feet below the ground. He was surrounded by shelves of food—dried, packaged meals, like the ones soldiers ate.

Whose are these? he thought. It was confusing, to speak to it without speaking. There was no line dividing what he wanted to say and what he just wanted to think.

The pastor. Speak out loud if you prefer, but quietly.

"Why is this food down here?" Kai whispered, relieved.

Because he doesn't want to share it. Take six.

Hands shaking with anticipation, Kai grabbed the meals, struggled up the ladder one-handed, headed for the gate.

Not yet. Go toward the church.

"I don't want to get caught," Kai whispered.

I know where everyone is. Go.

Kai went. The voice directed him along the back of the church, to a dirt- and leaf-covered black steel grate in the ground along the back wall.

Open the grate. Drop four down.

Drop them. Why on Earth would he do that?

Realization swept over him with an icy chill. It was down there. Hiding. Probably hurt.

I'm in trouble, just like you. I'm alone and afraid, just like you.

As Kai knocked on the door, he told himself he had no choice but to do what the Luyten told him. It hadn't made any threats, but it was huge, and powerful, and he was just a kid.

A woman answered the door. She was Asian like him, a streak of grey running through her long hair. More importantly, the aroma of fish and rice wafted through the door from a nearby kitchen.

Her name is Mrs. Boey. Tell her you have a message from her daughter. Valerie.

"Mrs. Boey? My name is Kai. I have a message from your daughter Valerie."

The woman's expression transformed. "You heard from my baby?" She opened the door. put a hand on Kai's shoulder and led him inside.

Valerie is outside Richmond, alive. She helped you escape. She asked you to tell her mother she's sorry about the argument they had before she left.

Is Valerie alive, Kai thought.

Probably not.

With a crippling knot of guilt in his stomach, Kai told Mrs. Boey her daughter was alive and well, as a dozen people sitting elbow-to-elbow around a kitchen table looked on. Food was already on the table, and after Kai delivered his news the woman had little choice but to invite him to share their meal. The food was delicious; Kai ate vora-

ciously, every chopstick-full sticking in his throat on the way down as he watched Mrs. Boey across the table, smiling, probably eating more easily than she had at any time since her sixteen-year-old daughter left to battle the Luyten four months earlier.

He should tell them, he thought. He should blurt out that there was a Luyten hiding under the church. Once it was out, there was nothing it could do. It was the enemy. It and its kind wanted to wipe out everyone on Earth, and they were *succeeding*—

If you tell her, you'll go back to being cold and hungry.

Kai didn't want to be hungry again. More than that, he didn't want to be alone in the dark, stumbling through places where there might be dead bodies.

"Do you have family nearby?" an old, bent woman asked Kai.

"No. I have an aunt and uncle in Connecticut, but it's too far."

I'm not a soldier. I haven't killed anyone.

It was not the first time the Luyten had told him this.

It claimed it had been shot out of the sky, part of a small contingent of Luyten on a night reconnaissance mission over D.C. The military knew a Luyten had been shot down in the area and they were hunting for it. For *Scout*, he reminded himself. It had asked Kai to call it Scout. It must have been injured in the crash, but it wouldn't say.

After the meal, Mrs. Boey said, "I'd ask you to stay, but as you can see, there's just no room." She gestured toward her relatives, most of them young or very old.

Kai told her he understood, and followed her to the door carrying the leftover food she had given him.

As he headed toward the back of the church, Kai wondered if Scout had purposely chosen a house where Kai was likely to get food, but not a place to sleep. If someone took Kai in, he would have less incentive to protect Scout's secret.

Yes, Scout said. *I don't want to die. I'm just as afraid to die as you are.*

"Why are you doing this to us?" Kai whispered, although there was no one to hear him—the street was cold and empty, the orange glowlights along the sidewalk his only guide in the darkness. "Can't we share the world? Why do you have to have it all to yourselves?"

We would have done that gladly, but we know your minds. Do you really think your kind would have taken us in as refugees? They won't even take you in.

Kai pulled open the grate leading to the church's basement and dropped the food Mrs. Boey had given him into the darkness.

Wake up. Scout's message was deafening, like an alarm set too loud.

Kai lifted himself from the cold concrete, looked groggily into the street, where mist crawled close to the pavement. "It's the middle of the night."

Soldiers are coming with spotlights. Hide in the bathroom.

Still half asleep, Kai gathered the towels and blanket he'd pilfered from an apartment using a key hidden by its owner and hurried into the bathroom.

A few minutes later Kai heard the purr of engines. Two all-terrain crawlers rolled past, flashing spotlights as soldiers scanned the buildings with night glasses. Kai pulled the bathroom door closed.

"How do they know where to find you?"

My heat signature. I have a baffle, but I can't run it all the time.

"Why not?"

The crawlers purred away. Kai wondered if Scout was debating whether to trust him. He wondered if it should.

I trust you now. But after I leave, or I'm killed, you'll tell your people what you've learned about me. If I'm gone, probably they won't believe you. But if I'm caught, they will.

Kai immediately thought to lie, to claim he wouldn't tell. Then he caught himself, remembered lying was impossible.

Talking to you was a betrayal of my kind. I feel deeply ashamed. I was alone, in terrible pain. I was afraid to die.

Was Kai betraying his kind, by keeping Scout's secret? He was sure he was, although it wasn't as if Scout was a threat, hiding under a church, cut off.

To answer your question, I'm almost out of power. That's why I can't run the baffle all of the time.

Kai had gotten accustomed to the sensation of Scout speaking in his head. It wasn't as unpleasant as it had been at first. It reminded him of how he'd grown to like hot sauce on his chili. The first time he'd tried hot sauce it had been awful, burning his tongue and lips, making his eyes water. But the stinging had grown pleasant.

When he pictured where the voice was coming from, though, when he pictured that giant starfish crawling around under the church . . .

That made him dizzy with fear.

"I don't understand why you don't just sneak out of the city, if you know where everyone is."

I am large, and a novel sight. I can't evade the eyes of every person who might look out their window.

That made sense. "So how will you ever escape?"

Unless one of my kind enters my range so I can contact it, I won't.

It was morning when Scout woke him again.

They're coming back. More of them. Many more.

Kai peered out at the rectangle of street visible from his sleeping spot, at the passing vehicles, the faded pod-style apartment complex across the street. "Will they find you?"

Yes, probably. You should get away now, before they come. Otherwise they might question you about what you've seen or heard. Their eyegear is equipped with vocal stress-detectors, so they'll know you're lying. I don't want you to get in trouble because you were kind to me. Go now, through the back.

Kai gathered up his bedding and ran out through the back side of the bay, into waist-high milkweeds that choked the space between the garage and the building behind it.

The telltale whisper of an ultralight copter grew louder as Kai pushed onto the sidewalk and turned right, up a hill.

You should feel proud, Scout said. *We should both feel proud. We were kind to each other, despite everything. I'm not ashamed to call you my friend.*

A line of army crawlers appeared at the top of the hill, the crawlers' legs tucked, their big wheels spinning.

Kai watched them pass, his emotions in a tangle. He would miss Scout, would miss its company at night, but he was also relieved to be getting away. He wanted to be free of the terrible guilt that he was betraying his people, although he would probably always feel guilty for consorting with the enemy. What would people think, if they found out?

Kai heard shouted orders. A moment later a squad of soldiers trotted around the corner. Head down, he pressed close to the buildings to let them pass. They were young, but not kids. Soldiers in their prime. There weren't many of them left.

What if a soldier asked him directly if he'd seen or heard anything? Would he lie to protect Scout? Scout probably knew the answer to that better than Kai did.

Maybe that was why Scout told Kai to leave, not out of concern for him, but because Scout was afraid Kai would betray it.

That's not true. I'm trying to protect you.

Down the hill, Kai could see the church, had a partial view beyond the fence, into the garden. Two soldiers were in there, but they didn't seem to know where to look. Scout's baffle must still be working.

I'm using the last of my power reserve to operate it. It won't last much longer, but maybe long enough.

One of the soldiers was a woman. Asian. It could be that woman's daughter. What was her name? Valerie. If those two soldiers went into the basement, would Scout kill them?

I'm not a soldier. I'm not a fighter.

Kai would, if they were Luyten, coming to kill him. In an instant.

He took a step toward the church, then hesitated. What should he do? Both choices seemed wrong.

He closed his eyes, pictured his mom. What would she want him to do? What she would want was what he should do. *You don't throw away friends*, she'd told him once. But wasn't it wrong to be friends with a Luyten in the first place? They'd killed her, and Dad too.

Opening his eyes, he headed down the hill, toward the church.

Kai, please. Don't. I just want to go home. I just want to see my mother. Now that I know you, I could never help them.

As Kai pushed through the gate, the soldiers turned, their weapons pointed at the ground.

"Go back to your home—" the Asian soldier started to say.

"It's in there," Kai said, pointing at the church. "In the cellar."

Both soldiers were suddenly wide-eyed alert.

They'll kill me. Please. They'll burn me.

"You *saw* it?" the other soldier, a black man, said.

"I—" Kai struggled to describe how he knew. "I heard it."

We're friends.

The Asian soldier was babbling into her comm, repeating what Kai had just said, then giving their location.

"Promise you won't hurt it. It's just a scout—not a soldier."

The two soldiers gawked at Kai like he was nuts, as a dozen others stormed through the gate.

"The cellar?" a gray-haired soldier called as they ran by.

"That's what the kid says."

They threw open the hatch, and soldiers poured down the steps.

They're coming. I'm scared, Kai. I'm so scared.

Kai bolted toward the church. "*Don't hurt it.*"

Why?

There were urgent shouts in the cellar, a sudden roar, a hot orange flash.

It burst through the open hatch into the bright sunlight like a monster from a nightmare. It was on fire, the flames growing higher as it fed them with fresh air, a great starfish galloping through the garden.

The soldiers in the garden peppered it with weapon fire until black blood was pouring from a dozen wounds. Kai screamed at them to stop, his shouts drowned out by the roar of the flames, the crackle of the weapons, and Scout, screaming in his mind.

As Scout finally lost his footing and rolled to the grass, Kai noticed that one of its limbs was missing. Ragged sutures ran across the stump. Scout must have lost the limb in the crash, then sewn it up while lying under the church.

Kai sobbed uncontrollably, babbling, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"What the hell is the matter with you?" one of the soldiers asked. They were staring at him, looking confused, disgusted.

"You didn't have to kill it. It was hurt, and it was just a scout, not a soldier."

"Maybe we should have read it its fucking rights," the soldier said.

Kai looked at the thing smoldering on the ground. He swallowed, wondered if he'd done the right thing, wondered if his mother would be proud. ❍

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LIKE A WASP TO THE TONGUE

Fran Wilde

Diana Rios swore she'd put the next stung brigger who entered her garrison med tent out of their misery with her bare hands.

"What possessed you to put a live wasp in your mouth, Jersey?" she asked, before tearing an antihistamine pen cap off with her teeth.

"Ith wath a beth! Ow!"

"Get over it. I'm not your mother." Rios spat the spent cap with its plastic taste into the trash and handed Jersey a freezpak. Four more briggers waited their turn on the bench by tent's flap, shaved heads bowed, stings and bites on their faces and hands. Another dragged fingernails across angry red welts on his left arm.

"Bet or no, you could have lost big time." She glared at them all, then pointed behind her to where Kuo's body lay. A brigger had carried Kuo to Rios's tent already dead, throat swollen shut. Claimed Kuo had swallowed a sentinel wasp by accident. Then two more briggers showed up, stung. Then Jersey. All still living. For now.

"Ith wathnt mah fault," Jersey said.

"Who, then?" Someone had removed a batch of the garrison's wasps from the vespidary. Someone had dulled them with smudges, then handed them out to waiting briggers.

Jersey shrugged. Wouldn't say. The others kept their eyes on the floor. In the silence, a high-pitched buzz ended in a yelp, then a stamp and a crackle. On the bench, Deece, the brigger with the welts, lifted his boot to look at the broken yellow and black body, the pulped wings.

"Captain Bilt offered extra rations for tips on who's starting these bets," Rios said.

No one moved. Jersey curled up on a cot with his back to Rios. He was Lefevre's man, and Lefevre lived to gamble. Called herself the garrison badass.

Two weeks left on the exoplanet, the final crew after hundreds of two-year de-

ployments, and these briggers seemed determined to screw things up. Rios hoped someone would break if the reward was sweet enough. "If not rations, then extra R-and-R when we leave E-17," she said.

Deece raised his head. His dark brown eyes met hers as another victim stumbled through the thick tent flap. Lefevre herself. The brawny brigger looked worse than Jersey had. Half-drunk, fully stung, and gasping. Rios grabbed her by the arm and lowered her to a brown canvas stretcher. Questions would wait.

Rios jammed an epi pen home. "Stay there," she ordered Lefevre.

She ranked everyone in the garrison until the captain returned. Lefevre stayed put, though her hands began to jitter as the epi hit her.

When Rios turned back to the bench, Deece nodded once at Lefevre, then looked at the floor. Finally.

Rios knew Lefevre's record. She'd seen everyone's files. A dare sent Lefevre to E-17 as a brigger in the first place: five shots of illegal hooch, a naked joyride in a lieutenant's vehicle, and a shocked visiting member of the upper brass.

Rios had already voiced suspicions to Bilt, but she had "history" with Lefevre. Not the good kind. She needed hard evidence. A witness.

As the garrison's military correctional officer, Bilt's job was rehabilitating briggers and making sure the client was happy. He'd refused to send a half-baked court-martial up the pipe with only Rios's word against Lefevre. Not with the mission so close to finished. Not with the corporate brass who'd leased the briggers looking for any mistake from their military suppliers. That could void their final payment.

Now Rios had a witness.

What she didn't have was Captain Bilt, not for a few days more. He'd taken the corporate officers in the long-haul to ceremonially shut down the last mine on E-17. Two days' drive. He'd left the briggers in Rios's care, but she couldn't do anything about Lefevre on her own. Corporate wouldn't listen to a brigger med-tech, only to the captain. Hell, the briggers barely listened to Rios.

Fine with her, as long as they stayed out of her tent.

At first the briggers had followed Bilt's final orders and started packing up the garrison. Rios passed a few briggers staring at the amber horizon and the dark, hole-pocked landscape. Heard them dare each other to eat the newly planted grass beyond the garrison's wall. The edible grass and gene-tweaked saplings laid in for the incoming colonists had begun to sprout, tinting the ground a soft cream.

A day later, the mess filled with bored briggers. Boredom bred more betting: Russian roulette with sentinel wasps.

Good thing Rios had plenty of antihistamine. And a stash of epi.

Good thing there weren't any real weapons in the garrison. Might have cleared the place of stupid. Left just her and the wasps, probably. Nice. Except wasps were worse than briggers.

She treated the briggers on the bench for their stings and bites and told them off. Sent them back to barracks with extra ice packs, certain there were briggers who didn't want to visit her tent. She'd heard what they called it, and her: the freezer.

She turned to Deece. In the brig for petty theft. His welts raised trails on his skin, nothing like a wasp reaction. The new sting on his hand had barely begun to swell. Stung in the med tent, not earlier. Good evidence that Deece had stayed clear of the wasp bet, but it didn't explain the welts. Deece gritted his teeth as she scraped skin from his arm, then took a vial of blood for testing. Tough kid. She gave him a tube of ointment. Quietly had him fingerprint a statement about Lefevre and the wasp bet, then held back the tent flap and let him go.

He worked in the vespidary, same as Lefevre. Rios could find him when she needed him.

Rios gathered up epi pen caps, bagged her sweat-damp gloves and mask, and swept the mashed wasp outside. She secured Deece's statement in her pocket. Rolled up Kuo in a cold bag. Even dead briggers got to go home.

When the tent was under control again, she picked a spare cot and closed her eyes. Idiots. Only two more weeks and she'd be done with briggers for the rest of her career. No way she'd get in this kind of mess again.

Jersey snored on his cot, breaking the tent's quiet with a barking rattle that hinted at sinus swelling. Lefevre rested in a semi-fetal curl, her shaved scalp prickling with sweat. Kuo slowly cooled and stiffened on a shelf farther back in the tent. Rios listened to the wind howl around the garrison walls. The sound took some getting used to. They'd only doused the garrison's dome a week ago. She willed herself calm.

Serve as garrison med-tech for two years on an Earth-type, pre-colonial planet, her advocate had said. Wipe your record clean. Simple. Patch up other briggers who ran the mining equipment and the terraformers for the corporate client. Two years, three months, twenty days, and a wakeup on E-17. Thirty-five men and women, five brass. No murderers or rapists on this jaunt, he promised. Saltpeter and serotonin in the food. No weapons. Nearby, too—next system over. Practically a vacation from the hospital; barely a punishment.

The advocate didn't tell her about the wasps until after she'd signed everything.

Rios heard something buzz and sat up, ready to swat. Jersey, snoring, made more of the noise. Over Jersey's prone body, Lefevre's cot lay empty. She'd quietly left the tent. Rios lowered her arm, slowly.

The wasps were conscripts, just like the briggers. Corporate had shipped hives of the modified insects down with the first deployment, had briggers set up the vespidary to breed more. Shifts of briggers trained wasps to sense heavy metals deep beneath the landscape: ore that would be inaccessible once the colonists arrived expecting the pristine planet they'd purchased. Briggers taught more wasps to scent progress points in the terraforming process.

When the sentinel wasps picked up markers for a stable terraform, they bashed their chitin-hardened heads against their sensor tubes. The briggers struck the biosphere dome and felt E-17's winds sweep in for the first time since landing. Nearly free.

"Why not robot sensors?" she'd asked Lefevre early on, before Bilt put them on opposite shifts.

Lefevre had winked at Rios. "Wasps are light to ship. They don't break down, can smell like the dickens, and don't need much programming. Just breed some more, sugar." She'd said some other things, too, and Rios had turned her down.

Later. Rios found three wasps crawling in her bunk. She demanded to be billeted alone in the med tent.

Now she shuddered, unable to shake loose the thought of wasps loose in her tent. She found fresh gloves. Might as well run tests on Deece's samples if she couldn't sleep.

Corporate had equipped the tent, but only basics remained: epi and antihistamine in abundance; meds; suture kits; test panels that resembled her grandmother's bingo cards. Paint each square with a bit of sample, see what luminesced. Dispense the proper medicine. Dismiss the brigger. Usually, the cards lit up colds and STDs. This time, swipes of Deece's samples didn't luminesce anything. Rios grumbled. Her portable micro-spectroscope, one of the few machines on base outside the corporate tent, had broken six months ago. She couldn't use it to test the sample.

Dammit, she needed Deece, and the wasps.

When Rios knocked on the hardflap Deece unsealed the vespidary door. She held out a vial containing a swab. "Can you train some wasps to scent for this?"

Deece frowned. "What is it?" He wasn't used to Rios leaving the med-tent any more than she was used to being out.

"Your samples. Came up blank on my tests. No gear left to analyze for new infections."

Deece raised an eyebrow.

"Worst case scenario, you reacted to something local. The wasps might scent it." She eyed his bandaged arm. "The ointment helped?"

"Just stopped itching." He paused. "Two more briggers have welts. I gave them the ointment."

"Tell them to come see me," she said, knowing they might not listen. She waited while Deece looked at the vial.

"I can try." He pulled on gloves. "Want to watch?"

She'd managed to stay out of the vespidary, with its living walls and incessant hum, for most of the tour. Now she waited, arms tucked tight to her sides, keeping well away from the crawling wasp nests.

Deece pulled a panel from the wall and shook six wasps into sample tubes, careful not to smash their antennae. "Darn things pick up markers fainter than any spectrometer. Who would have thought?"

He mixed a packet of sugar with a vial of water, then held a drop of the fluid above a tube. Rios could see the wasp crawling inside, its heart-shaped head and oval eyes glistening. She looked closer; four smaller eyes atop the wasp's head glared back at her. Rios shuddered.

Deece lowered the dropper and the wasp raced to the tube's filter wall, butting its head against the filter hard enough to make a tiny sound: click. He brushed the sample swab against the filter and repeated the sugar drop. The tube clicked again as the wasp threw itself at the filter.

After half an hour, he said, "Next time the wasp catches the scent, it will do the same thing. You'll hear the clicking." He held out two tubes to her. She willed herself to reach for them.

She'd broken a wasp's nest as a curious child, with the expected result. She could still feel the prickling legs and the segmented bodies trespassing her clothes. She'd found one tangled in her hair. It stung her twice. Too late in the season for more to sting, she'd learned later. Mostly males survived till then, and they only bit. Still, her mother had run from their trailer with the fire extinguisher and doused the nest. Had pulled her own epi-pen from her pocket and treated her daughter once Rios's throat had begun to swell. "Why did God make wasps?" Rios asked through adrenaline-racked sobs. Her mother shook her head. "To teach us not to be so stupid," she'd answered.

Twenty years later, E-17 had a pressing need for a good med-tech, and Rios had a career-ending mistake she needed to erase. Now she wrapped her hands around the sensor tubes and took the wasps. Other briggers had welts. She went to the barracks to find them.

There, Lefevre rested in a bunk close to the door. The bed was festooned with ration chits. "Look who's gracing us with her presence," she murmured.

Rios ignored her. She scanned the tent, saw the men Deece had mentioned. Bunked in the back, scratching. Both mining briggers. One had welts on his cheeks that were beginning to pustulate. Rios lifted a sensor tube to his face. Click. The wasp beat itself against the tube.

"You should have come to see me," she said.

The men stared back. Career briggers. Went from penalty to penalty. Better miners than soldiers, now. "Couldn't take the time off," one said slowly.

"Not interested in getting dead," said the other.

"You're quarantined, now," she said. "Go to the med tent."

The men looked past her to Lefevre, who nodded. "Get your gnarly asses out of here."

"You know what they've been working?" asked Rios.

Lefevre shrugged. "Mine 22, same one that lost two men down that vent."

Rios waited for her to say more.

Finally Lefevre added, "Rest came back fine. Those two only started looking like that a couple of days ago."

Rios was about to ask another question, but Deece tore into the barracks, trailing dust. "Bring your kit. Captain's back."

Rios stepped from the cool dark of the barracks into the bright light. E-17's gravity tugged at her feet. The captain would take charge of these assholes before anything else went wrong.

When she reached the garrison's gate, Rios realized she was still in charge.

The captain hunched over the rover's charred steering wheel. Melted polymer dripped from the rover's blistered roof and over his blackened hands. Rios smelled rocket exhaust.

"What happened? Where are the others?" The four corporate officers who'd left with the captain were nowhere to be seen.

Bilt's eyes rolled back in his head. His face seeped and bulged from burns. Rios listened as he hissed a few words. "Gone," he said. "Home."

"Transport won't come for two weeks, Captain. They can't go home."

Bilt shook his head and whispered so that only Rios could hear. "Sent a signal. Dosed me with something. Corporate ship landed almost on top of me. They're gone." Then he shuddered and moaned.

Her medkit wasn't up for this. Rios pushed Deece toward the tent. "Get a stretcher."

Deece moved.

A group of briggers milled around at the garrison's edge. Ration chits exchanged hands as they bet on Bilt. "Go pack something!" she shouted. They muttered and skulked, then disappeared.

Deece returned and helped her heave the captain onto the stretcher. By the time they got him inside the med tent, someone had won more rations: Bilt was dead.

Rios crossed the garrison, her cap twisted in her hands, shorn head bobbing in the sunlight. She headed for the corporate officers' tent. Lefevre and Jersey emerged from barracks, aiming for the same place.

On opposite shifts, Rios spoke with Lefevre only when she had to. She took her meals alone, used the exercise equipment when the others were in the mess. Kept her head down. Now she swerved at them, fists clenched. The two briggers veered toward the vespidary, pulling on their protective gloves, as if they'd been headed to work their shifts the whole time.

They'd be in the vespidary for at least twenty minutes, checking the hives. Rios hoped that would be enough time to break into the corporate officers' files.

She heard footsteps behind her. Deece. She waved him closer. She could use his help getting into the corporates' quarters.

The officers had locked the carbon fiber tent down hard when they'd left; black tent flap sealed, keypad armed. Rios pulled a scalpel from her pocket and dragged it over the fabric. The sharp blade couldn't pierce the tent. "Damn," she muttered.

Deece tapped the keypad awake. "Cabrese let me in once," he said, red faced. Yeah, Rios thought. Science Officer Cabrese had a reputation for doing that. She let a lot of briggers in, once. Sometimes twice. Double rations after.

Rios had turned her down too. Last time she'd taken up with a corporate, she'd wound up on E-17.

Deece had paid attention to Cabrese's moves. All of them. He hit the keypad combination on the first try.

"What are you really in the brig for?" Rios whispered as they slipped in and resealed the door.

Deece shrugged. He knew what his record said. "Stole supplies. They were going to destroy them, before we shipped out. I knew locals who were hungry. Figured no one would get hurt. Forgot about ol' number one." He looked bashful in the dim light. "What about you?"

Rios frowned. She'd taken the brig tour with the condition that no one saw her record. A med tech could negotiate. Even from the brig. Now she shrugged and gestured to the tent. "Let's get this done."

Bigger than the garrison's mess, the corporate tent was divided into five apartments: four large, plus a small one for the late captain. Rios saw proper comm and entertainment feeds, though Deece grunted when he tapped at their screens. No signal. Rios spotted a smashed comlink and a blackened controller under a nest of fouled wires and bent data keys.

She pushed through the remains of shredded reports. The briggers had been locked out of the corporate tent. No one could have done this but Cabrese and her team. "Didn't leave us much, did they?"

Then she found it. A hastily torn sheet of sentinel results, with Cabrese's notes. Easy to put back together.

She held the results up to Deece. "What's this?"

He waved his hand. "They had me train a batch of wasps after the vent opened. Thought they'd found an underground organism and wanted to scent for it. Some weird fungus. Said it disappeared when the vent closed."

But the wasps told a different story. Cabrese had placed sensor wasps from Mine 22 all the way to the garrison. The garrison's sensors had reacted four days ago.

Rios read Cabrese's notes. "Fungus spreads as fast as a man can travel. Wait ten years, come back for another try. Get the ore and go."

Deece searched the tent. "Looks like they only salvaged corporate gear. Bilt was military, not corporate. Not worth the fuel."

Rios cursed under her breath. They'd been left to die.

What would Lefevre's briggers do when they discovered their tour didn't end in two weeks? Rios shuddered. How long until they killed each other? Starting with the outsiders.

Deece gripped the sensor report so it puckered and twisted. "Fungus can't be the only reason. Cabrese told me the vent sealed itself after a day. What scared them?"

She shuffled through papers on the workstation. Found a micro drive that had escaped destruction of the comms system. She slotted the drive. Opened up image after annotated image of mottled welts. Bad sensor results had been the first straw.

She shook her head. Cabrese didn't care if the briggers learned why they'd been abandoned, as long as they couldn't signal for help. And as long as corporate got away clean.

Deece looked over her shoulder. "The two briggers who died at the mine didn't fall into the vent."

Rios seethed. No one from Mine 22 had come to her med tent for help. She searched until she found tubes of ointment and painkiller patch wrappers on the floor. They'd been treated in the corporate tent. Maybe at first Cabrese didn't want to scare off the colonists, or she feared the corporate liability. Later she just wanted to save her own ass.

Deece pried a magnifying vial from the back of a drawer and held it up.

Rios peered through the optical glass at a sticky looking crust in the vial, then at

the hazard sticker that bound the vial closed. The fungus from beneath E-17's surface looked a lot like the dust that blew through the garrison ever since they'd taken the dome down.

"E-17 alien fungus," she read from Cabrese's notes. "Decontamination would take too long, and the mission now violates a hundred eco-development treaties, including McKay." Rios continued, "The fungus seems able to cross the blood-brain barrier."

She stopped reading. "They didn't leave us to die. They figured we were already dead. They didn't purge the data because it didn't matter what we knew."

"Why aren't we sick, then?" Deece asked, then stopped himself.

"Let me see your arm," she said. He pulled back the bandages. His welts had nearly disappeared. Completely different from Cabrese's images, and the two briggers Rios had quarantined.

Deece's face showed betrayal, loss. Someone at home. Rios didn't have any such connections. Not any more. Once stung, twice shy.

"How long do we have?" he asked.

"Doesn't say. We need to know who's infected." Rios held up the vial with the fungus. "The wasps can detect the fungus on our skin. What about on our breath?"

"Better to know who'll die first, you mean?" Deece frowned, doubtful.

"Better to start figuring out ways to slow it down, or cure it." She pointed at his arm. Time to get to work.

Deece didn't budge. "What got you brigged?"

Rios cleared her throat, thick with dust. "I got caught feeding my corporate boyfriend's habit from my hospital's supply." She coughed. "He turned me in."

Deece tilted his head to the right. Looked at her. "I'll get started."

He unsealed the tent flap.

A crowd of briggers stood outside, Lefevre and Jersey in the lead.

"Where'd the brass go?" Jersey asked.

She considered lying to them. Buying time. She thought about telling them the truth, and hoped she wasn't being stupid. "They ditched us. Murdered Bilt. We're on our own."

She slipped past Lefevre as voices rose in protest. Heard the snap of knuckles against teeth. Shouting.

Rios grabbed Deece's sleeve and ran with him to the vespidary. That door had a lock too.

Rios's peripheral vision swam black and gold from too much time locked behind the vespidary's living walls. Her stomach rumbled. The vespidary smelled of pulp and dust.

Deece separated two dozen wasps into sensor tubes. He waved a swab over the tubes. The wasps, anticipating a hit of sugar water, thrashed their abdomens and bashed at the tops of the tubes with their armored heads. Two clamped onto the filter mesh with tiny mandibles, then fell away when Deece shook the tubes. "These are ready."

A small window on the vespidary's door offered glimpses of passing briggers as E-17's thirty-hour day cooled to twilight. Even when the area between the vespidary and the mess was clear, Rios heard shouts and arguments from nearby.

Lefevre appeared and drew a fighting ring on the ground between the vespidary and the mess, then called to the briggers, daring them, "Go down fighting, or fucking. Whatever works."

Rios watched as Jersey took the circle, followed by another brigger. Jersey bit the man's ear until it bled, then wrestled him to the ground, landing punch after punch. Three briggers disappeared behind the vespidary with one of the mining briggers. Rios could tune out the fighting, but the four-way echoed loud through the tent's canvas.

"What's worse?" Lefevre shouted at the vespidary from her perch: a bench they'd dragged from the mess. "Doing anything you want? Or spending your last days trapped with a bunch of bugs?"

Rios and Deece didn't answer.

A brigger leapt at Lefevre, and she kicked him down hard. He didn't move. Twenty-seven briggers remained in the garrison, not counting Rios and Deece.

Rios's stomach growled.

"We can kill the wasps and eat them," Deece said, looking around the vespidary and its wriggling walls. Even behind the partitions that kept the wasps from the room, the hum was unending.

"Protein is protein," Rios allowed. The thought made her gag. "Let's hold off. They'll make more of a meal when we're desperate."

She distracted Deece by making him list everything he'd done after the rash had started: what he ate, where he went. There was nothing unusual. No reason he should have survived.

As night settled, the garrison quieted. Then Lefevre banged a fist hard against the vespidary window.

"One miner's dead, Rios. Scratched his face off while he was busy dying. Couple more briggers have welts now."

Rios came to the door. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Tell me what medicine stops it."

Rios eyed Deece's welt-free arm. "I'm not sure medicine will help."

Lefevre rattled the door. Deece had changed the lock code. "Then what will? No one wants to die like that."

Lefevre held up a box of rations as a peace offering. "No one will mess with you."

Deece gathered up the sensor tubes and a larger box of wasps, well sealed except for tiny air filters. Rios opened the door.

Deece walked from the vespidary to the ring of briggers, Rios following. Two briggers, welts creeping up their arms, sat on the ground, scratching.

Rios walked through the ring, straight to the med tent. She filled her pockets with antihistamine and epi pens, then rolled the miner's body into a freezer blanket, like she'd done with Kuo. When she finished, she stepped out into the light again and found Lefevre talking to a brigger. Fungus welts criss-crossed the brigger's arms and legs.

"Fungus made it to his brain," Rios said loud enough that the others could hear. "Welts across his scalp, fungus in his eyes. He went blind first." She held out her hand for a sensor tube. Deece handed her two. "We're going to use wasps to detect infection. I've tested it on myself, Deece, and on the dead brigger. We get a reaction only on the dead man."

"So if the wasps react, we're dead?" a brigger asked from the ground.

"No. If the wasps react, you're infected. Deece was infected two days ago. Now he's not. We're still working out why."

"How do we know you're right?" a brigger asked.

Rios thought of Cabrese canceling the transport while trying to save herself. Her head filled with an angry buzz. She looked over the briggers, their bruised faces, their dropped shoulders. They'd given up. "We don't know." She touched the brigger's shoulder. "But we can try."

He looked away, muttering, "Get on with it." Let her hold the tube with the wasp in it to his skin, then to his lips. The wasp pounded its head against the filter, seeking sugar. Infected.

Same with the next eight. The ninth, eleventh, and twentieth weren't infected. The rest were.

"What's the commonality?" she asked aloud.

Jersey guffawed. "Fucking hell." He pointed at two briggers. "You all went at it with the Mine 22 guys." He wheeled around and pointed some more. "You lot did Cabrese, and those over there." He paused. "And me, and Lefevre too."

Faces reddened. Rios groaned. Somehow, the fungus got into the skin faster through friction and sweat. Contact. That's why she was clear. She looked at Deece. Narrowed her eyes.

He raised his hand, palm facing her. "Just with Cabrese, swear."

Rios saw several other briggers nod. So Cabrese didn't escape clean after all.

"The fungus moves fast. But Deece had the welts, and he's okay now." She had everyone's attention. "He was stung in my med tent, but not by one of the regular wasps." She turned to Deece. "You'd trained that wasp for Cabrese, right?"

Deece nodded. "Probably."

Rios thought fast. "That wasp processed the fungus through its system. It didn't die from it. But the wasp's venom, combined with the processed fungus, stopped Deece's welts."

Lefevre narrowed her eyes. "You want us to get stung, on your guesswork?" Given Lefevre's reaction to her last sting, wasps were just as dangerous as fungus. "Kuo died from the wasps. Worse off than the miners. We saw it."

The briggers on the ground, the ones with the welts, seemed game for anything, except crossing Lefevre. They waited, watched.

Rios let out a calming breath. "We're not going anywhere. Transport's not coming. We can die, or we can live. Could start our own colony. But that takes everyone."

Lefevre made a face. "I'm not starting any colony with these blockheads. Mess of screw-ups. And you—since when are you one of us?"

Since always, Rios thought. Just didn't know it. "They left us here because they know they can always get more briggers. You going to help them get rid of the evidence?"

Eyes narrowing, Lefevre said, "Keep a wasp in your mouth longer than me. Prove you're a brigger, then you can try stinging people."

Rios swallowed hard. Was her guess worth the risk? Worth doing something stupid? She nodded. She didn't yet understand how wasp-venom worked with fungus. She'd figure it out later, if there was a later.

"The bites won't kill," Rios told Deece, back in the vespidary. "It's just swelling. Control the swelling, mediate the pain. If I'm stung, you have epi. Worst that happens is I get off E-17 sooner than you." The walls of wasps buzzed in reply.

Deece inspected wasp after wasp. "Too bad they couldn't make stingless females."

She'd asked him to pull as many male wasps as he could. That way she'd have the crawling and the wings, maybe get bitten. But she might not get stung. Male wasps didn't have stingers.

"They tried. Cabrese told me. The hives died." Deece muttered while he squinted. Stingers were hard to see on the squirming bodies. Males had more segments on their antennae, sometimes. Even harder to see.

Rios stuffed her pockets with epi pens.

Lefevre gathered the briggers outside. She shouted, "Rations'll run out, and all you'll have to eat is grass. Best bet on me and feast."

Rios stepped from the vespidary. Two briggers sized her up, then put chits on Lefevre's growing pile. Deece dropped a chit on Rios and handed the box of wasps to Jersey.

Jersey lit a smudge near the box, dulling the wasps.

The sun broke over the horizon's raw edge as Rios joined Lefevre in the circle. Stood with her hand out and felt the hard body Jersey placed in her palm. She

couldn't look at it. Lifted her hand to her mouth as Lefevre did, and popped the wasp in her mouth.

Then they waited, staring at one another.

At first, Rios couldn't taste anything but the smoke Jersey used to dull the wasps. Then she felt a weak touch, an antennae twitch. Her bile rose sharp and sour. She nearly spat the wasp out. Not in front of the briggers.

Rios clamped her mouth shut. Tried to breathe through her nose. Something flicked thin and wiry against her tongue. A wing. Rios hoped she had the right kind of wasp.

Jersey swatted at a wasp that had gotten loose. He stepped hard on the ground and a soft crunch broke the circle's silence.

Her wasp woke enough to drag a wingtip across the roof of Rios's mouth. Her throat convulsed. The thought made her heart pound. A live wasp, maybe female, in her throat. Like Kuo.

She stoppered her panic. Tried to breathe through her nose.

Then she realized her mistake. If no one was stung, Lefevre would guess she'd rigged the bet with male wasps. The briggers would know she lied. They wouldn't listen to her.

That was death for sure, and sooner, not later.

Looking up, she found Lefevre staring at her. Lefevre pressed her lips shut in a fierce grimace. She stepped closer to Rios. Her eyes dared Rios to quit, dared her to keep going. The wasp thumped its abdomen against Rios's cheek. Rios twitched.

She felt the weight of the briggers' gaze prickle her skin. This gamble wasn't stupid to them. Badassery eased everything. Boredom, illness, abandonment. Badassery was a moment of clarity. A win.

Rios had never wanted to be a badass. Wasn't sure she wanted to be one now.

The wasp crawled slowly on her tongue, legs pressed, searching. Its head butted her teeth: click.

Lefevre's eyes widened. Her cheek shuddered.

Perhaps, Rios thought, she might win another way. By not being stupid. The briggers might follow someone who changed the rules. They might see it as a promise. Survival instead of going down fighting. Rios hoped they would. She drew a deep breath in through her nose.

With her tongue, she flicked the still-drowsy wasp toward her molars and bit hard. She ground down, crunching its abdomen. The taste was sour and sharp. Thick fluid oozed through the broken sheath of wasp. Rios fought the urge to gag as she mashed the wasp into a paste. Unstung, she swallowed.

Rios opened her mouth: empty.

Lefevre spat her wasp out into her hand. "Damn." She frowned. She sounded relieved.

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controversial and informative articles, and classic stories.

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Around the circle, briggers clapped Deece's shoulder as he swept up their chits.

Someone pumped Rios's hand and someone else pounded her back and whooped. Surrounded by briggers, she laughed.

A dust-laden breeze swept through the garrison as five briggers took the black corporate tent apart. They dragged one of the bigger apartment sections over to Rios's med station and began sealing the tough fabric to the faded brown canvas of her tent, more than doubling the space inside. Jersey carried a box of corporate equipment into the tent—tablets, a micro-spectroscope, optical lenses, and medical supplies—and placed it on top of the expensive desk Cabrese had called her own.

"You'll get a good lab going with this gear," he said.

Rios nodded agreement. She brushed a finger over the fine corporate micro-spectroscope and waited for Deece to bring the first batch of fungus-exposed female wasps from the vespidary. Two rash-covered briggers sat on the medlab's bench, scratching while they waited to help her test the cure.

To pass the time, she walked through the new section of the medlab and discovered that the corporate tent had embedded micromesh windows sandwiched between layers of black cloth. She opened the panels and let E-17's daylight pour in.

Beyond the tent, more briggers redistributed corporate's gear under Lefevre's watchful eye. A pile of broken communication equipment and spare parts grew beside the mess tent.

Another crew of briggers built awnings and wind barriers beyond the garrison perimeter, using more of the corporate tent. Rios and Lefevre had agreed on one thing: briggers needed something to do.

Rios came up with the plan to dig foundations for more permanent individual quarters. Lefevre had grudgingly admitted it was a good idea.

"We'll spread out a bit, make some tunnels," Lefevre told the crews. "But keep the mess for everyone." She'd used the back of a ration chit to sketch an example hut, set low to the ground. Briggers were miners, after all. Then she'd drawn an interior complete with something Rios didn't recognize at first.

"Game room," muttered Lefevre. Rios swore Lefevre looked almost embarrassed.

Deece passed by one of the medlab's windows, carrying a box of clear vials. Rios met him outside the tent.

"First generation," Deece said, lifting the vials into the light. Tiny chitinous bodies made soft tapping noises inside the vials. The wasps twitched their abdomens and flexed their wings at Rios.

No sense being afraid of you anymore, she thought. We're stuck with each other.

Rios lifted a vial from the box and carried it, a jab of antihistamine, and a freezpack to the waiting briggers. Her pockets were still filled with epi.

She had the first brigger hold out his hand, palm down. She turned the vial over on the back of his hand and pulled the slide-lid free. Then she tapped the vial and waited for the wasp to crawl down the side. The brigger shifted his feet.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Bannon," he mumbled, his eyes on the wasp.

"Your first name? Mine's Diana." Briggers didn't share first names. But, Rios realized, we're not really briggers anymore. We're colonists.

"Jenson," he said, then hissed at the wasp's sting.

She slid the vial's lid back in place and handed Jenson Bannon the freezpack. "Stay here for a bit, until I know you're not going to react badly to the venom."

Jenson nodded, shaking his hand.

The second patient, Bane, first name, Mirlo, bellyached and groused, but she held out her hand for the sting too. Rios tried to ease her pain as best she could. Then Rios

packed up the wasp vials and handed them back to Deece. She ran her hand across the stubble on her scalp.

Deece waited with her as she observed the two patients. Over the next hour, the stung colonists began to show one sign of relief, much as Deece had: they stopped scratching at their rashes. If all went well, their welts would disappear in a day.

And then? More fungus-exposed wasps, more stings. Perhaps, with corporate's tools, a vaccine for those who hadn't been infected yet. Could she make a vaccine that didn't require a sting? Rios hoped so.

"The next generations will be better able to process the fungus," Deece said.

Lefevre stepped through the tent flap, catching the drift of the conversation. "Couple generations will change everyone, likely. If we survive it."

Rios looked out the tent window at the red, pitted landscape. At the colonists digging foundations. She turned around and looked at her lab. The wasps hummed and knocked their heads against the clear vials Deece held: Click.

"We'll survive," she said. "We'll adapt."

Jersey's shout carried into the tent on the breeze. Another voice replied, filled with anger. Fighting over the components of a broken tablet.

"I'll put a stop to that before they kill each other," Lefevre said. "We barely have enough people as it is." She started for the tent exit.

Rios moved to catch up with her.

"You know corporate will be back someday," Lefevre said.

Rios didn't doubt it. They'd return to E-17, looking to sweep away the past, like she'd swept up the dead wasp that had stung Deece. But maybe it wouldn't be that easy.

Rios remembered the crackle of the wasp nest she'd broken apart with a stick as a child. The angry hum of wings against her hands.

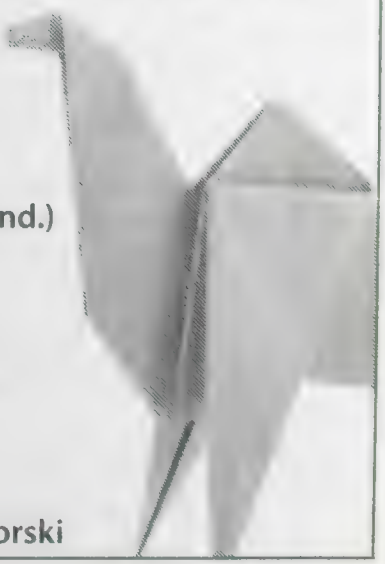
"Tell you what." Rios smiled at her old adversary as she held the tent flap open. She looked past the people walking beyond the boundary of the former garrison, and at those gathering the first of the edible grass. "I'll make you a bet. When corporate returns to E-17, I wager we'll teach them one hell of a lesson." ○

Camel Through the Eye of a Needle

1. *Origami*
Both models,
dromedary and Bactrian,
incorporate space-time folds,
allowing nano-level miniaturization,
but given the large number
of Escher recursions are
not recommended for the beginner.
(Although contrary to popular opinion,
stairwell narcosis is almost certainly an urban legend.)

2. *Oasis*
Across a desert of stars,
the *Kamelos*, trailing
a plume of spent hydrogen,
is unable to resist
the quantum lure
of an even thirstier black hole.

—Robert Borski



OF FINEST SCARLET WAS HER GOWN

Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick tells us that he has just finished his "new, incredibly entertaining novel, *Chasing the Phoenix,* in which confidence tricksters Darger and Surplus accidentally conquer China." As readers may recall from stories like "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" (October/November 2001) and "Girls and Boys, Come Out to Play" (July 2005), this sort of thing is always happening to them. A conquering of a different sort takes place in Michael's engaging new fantasy about a determined young woman who enters the uncharted territory of power dressing in Hell.

Of finest scarlet was her gown;
It rustled when it touched the ground.
Even the Devil, with all her wealth,
Had no such silks to clothe herself.

Su-yin was fifteen when her father was taken away. She awoke from uneasy sleep that night to the sound of tires on the gravel drive and a wash of headlights through her room. From the window she saw a stretch limousine glide to a halt in front of the house. Two broad-shouldered men wearing sunglasses got out to either side. One opened the passenger door. A woman emerged. She wore a dress that covered everything from her neck to her ankles except for a long slit on the side that went all the way up one leg.

A thrill of dark foreboding flew up from her like a wind.

The woman cocked a wrist and one of her bodyguards—Su-yin had seen enough of their kind to know them at sight—handed her a cigarette. The other lit it. Flickering match-light played over the harsh planes of a cruel but beautiful face. In an instant of sick revulsion, Su-yin experienced a triple revelation: first that this woman was not human; then that whatever she might be was far worse than any mere demon; and finally that, given the extreme terror her presence inspired, she could only be the Devil herself.

Quickly, Su-yin pulled on her clothes—jeans, flannel shirt, running shoes—as she had been taught to do if strangers came to the house late at night. But she did not slip out the back door and run through the woods as she was supposed to. Instead, she knelt by the window and watched through the slats of the Venetian blinds.

The Devil unhurriedly smoked her cigarette, exhaling through her nostrils. Then she flicked away the butt and nodded. One of her underlings went to the front door and hammered on it with his fist. *Bam! Bam! Bam!* The sound was an assault upon the helpless house. There was a long silence. Then the door opened.

Su-yin's father stepped outside.

The general's bearing was stiff and proud. He listened politely while the bodyguard spoke. Then he gestured the man aside, dismissing him as irrelevant, and turned to confront the dark woman.

She handed him a rose.

For the space of three long breaths, Su-yin's father clutched the flower, black as midnight, staring down at it in horror and disbelief. Then he seemed to crumple. It was as if all the air had gone out of him. His head sagged. Weakly, he half-turned toward the house, lifting a hand in a gesture that as good as said, "At least . . ."

The Devil snapped her fingers and pointed toward the limousine, where a bodyguard held open a door. She might have been giving orders to a dog.

To Su-yin's shock, her father obeyed.

Doors slammed. The engine growled to life. Heart pounding, Su-yin sprinted downstairs. Snatching the keys from the end table by the door, she ran for the Lexus. She didn't have a learner's permit yet, but the general had taken her to the parking lot at the stadium when no games were in the offing and let her try the car out under his careful supervision. So she knew how to drive. Sort of.

By the time she'd gotten down the driveway and onto Alan-a-Dale Lane, the limousine was almost out of sight. Su-yin drove as fast as she dared, the steering wheel loose in her hands. She could see the limousine's red taillights in the distance and did her best to keep up, wandering off the road and jerking back on again. A truck swerved out of her way, horn blaring. Luckily, there were no cops about. But the limo pulled steadily away from her, dwindling on the miracle mile and then disappearing on Route One.

It was gone.

Su-yin mashed her foot down on the accelerator. The car leapt wildly forward and through a red light. She heard brakes screeching and horns screaming and what might have been an accident, but paid them no mind. All she could think of was her father.

Her father was never a religious man. But when her mother died, he had emptied out the mud room and built a shrine there with candles, a framed photograph of his wife, and some of her favorite things: a carton of Virginia Slims, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking,* a stuffed toy that had somehow survived from her childhood in rural Sechuan. Then he had gone into the little room, closed the door, and cried so loudly that Su-yin was terrified. He had seen that fear on her when he emerged, more than an hour later, his face as expressionless as a warrior's bronze mask. Scooping her up, he had lifted her into the air over and over again until she laughed. Then he'd said, "I will always be here for you, little princess. You will always be my daughter, and I will always love you."

Su-yin's hands were white on the wheel and there were tears flowing down her face. It was only then that she realized that she, the general's daughter, was displaying weakness. "Stop that right now," she told herself fiercely. And almost overshot the strip club in whose lot the Devil's stretch was parked.

Su-yin parked the car and composed herself. The club was shabby, windowless, and obviously closed. But where else could they have gone? She went inside. In the foyer a bearded man with a sleeveless shirt that showed biker tattoos said, "You ain't got no business here, girlie. Scram!"

"I have an interview," Su-yin said, making it up as she went along, "An audition, I mean. With the head lady."

"You're talent?" The man stared at her impudently. "Oh, they gonna eat you up." Then he jerked his head. "Enda the hall, down the stairs, straight on to the bottom."

Trying not to show how terrified she was, Su-yin followed his directions.

The hallway smelled of disinfectant, vomit, and stale beer. The handrail down the stairs rattled and some of the treads felt spongy underfoot. A lone incandescent bulb faded further and further into the distance behind Su-yin.

Save for the sound of her own feet, the stairway was completely silent.

Flight after flight she descended, the light growing steadily weaker until she was groping her way in absolute darkness. At some point, because it seemed impossible that the stairway could continue as far down as it seemed, she began counting landings. At twenty-eight, she bumped into a wall.

By feel, Su-yin found a doorknob. It turned and she stumbled through a doorway into a dim red city. A sun the color of molten bronze shone weakly through its clouds. The air stank of coal smoke, sulfur, and diesel exhaust. Sullen brick buildings, scarred with graffiti, overlooked narrow streets where trash blew in the cold breeze. There was no trace of either her father or the Devil.

Su-yin took a step backward and bumped into the side of a brick building. The door through which she had come had disappeared.

"Where am I?" she asked out loud.

"You're in Hell, of course. Where else would you be?"

Su-yin turned to find herself face to face with a scrawny, flea-bitten, one-eyed disgrace of a tomcat perched atop an overflowing trash can. He grinned toothily. "Spare a few bucks for a fella what's down on his luck?"

"I . . ." Su-yin seized control of herself. She had to expect things would be different here. "Take me to the Devil, and I'll give you whatever money I have." Then she remembered that she'd left behind her purse. "Actually, I only have a few coins in my pocket—but I'll give you them all."

The cat laughed scornfully. "I can see *you're* going to fit in here really well!" He extended a paw. "I'm Beelzebub. Not the famous one, obviously."

"Su-yin." She shook the paw carefully. Its fur was greasy and matted. "Will you help me?"

"Not for the crap money you're offering." Beelzebub jumped down from the trashcan. "But since I got all eternity with nothing better to do, I'll help you out. Not because I like you, understand. Just because it's an offense against local community standards."

Hell was a city like any other city save that there was nothing good to be said about it. Its inhabitants were as rude as Parisians, its streets as filthy as those of Mumbai, its air as tainted as that of Mexico City. Its theaters were closed, its libraries were burned-out shells, and of course there were no churches. Those few shops that weren't shuttered had long lines. The public facilities were far from clean and, without exception, had run out of toilet paper long ago. It didn't take Su-yin long to realize that her father was not going to be easily found. There was no such thing as a City Hall or, indeed, any central authority of any kind. Hell appeared to be an anarchy. Nor was there a wealthy district for the privileged. "It's a socialist's dream world," Beelzebub told her. "Everybody's equally miserable here."

The Devil could be anywhere. And though the cat led her up streets and down, there was not a trace of that Dark Lady to be seen.

In a rundown park little better than a trash dump she came upon a pale-skinned young man sitting cross-legged on a park bench whose back slats were missing. His hands were resting on his knees, palms up, thumbs touching the tips of his forefingers. His head was tilted back. His eyes were closed. "What are you doing?" Su-yin asked him.

"Curiosity? Here?" The young man continued staring sightlessly at the sky. "How . . . curious." Then he lowered his chin and, opening his eyes, studied her through a shock of jet-black hair. His eyes were faintest blue. "A pretty girl. Curiouser and curiouser."

Su-yin blushed.

"Watch out for this one, Toots," Beelzebub said. "He'll talk the knickers offa you in no time flat."

"It seems you have a friend. In Hell. Inexplicable. Tell me what you see."

"See?"

"See," the young man said. "Hell is different for everybody. What you see is pretty much what you deserve."

"Then I guess I don't deserve much." Su-yin described the litter-filled park and the sad buildings that surrounded it as best she could.

"No wasps? No flames? None of those nasty little things you can only see out of the corner of your eye? I begin to wonder if you belong here at all." The young man uncrossed his legs, and sat like a normal boy, all elbows and knees. "In answer to your question, I was meditating, foolish though that may well seem to you. Against all reason, I appear not to have entirely given up hope. But I doubt that you're interested in my story."

"I am, actually." Su-yin sat down on the park bench beside the boy. Unlikely though it was, she couldn't help hoping that he was nice. "What's your name?"

"Rico. When I was alive, I thought I was a pretty hard sort. I cut class, boosted cars, smoked reefer, had sex with girls. Oh, and I died young. That's important. I was shot dead in my very first hold-up. I strutted through the gates of Hell like a rooster, convinced that I was the baddest, wickedest man ever consigned to damnation.

"Oh, was I wrong! So far as I can tell, until you popped up I was the *least* wicked person here. I say that with no pride whatsoever. Because it means that I was damned by the slightest of margins. Patting a dog or smiling at an old woman or dropping a dime in a beggar's hand probably would have been enough to tip the balance. One tiny act of kindness more and I'd be sitting in a penthouse in Heaven today, eating porterhouse steak and drinking Bordeaux wine while pouring Evian water into a Limoges saucer for my pet ocelot. So I thought . . . maybe if I improved myself that tiny little bit, I'd wake up and find myself somewhere else. See what I mean about hope? I've been doing this for a long, long time, and no results. Still, it's not like I have anything better to do. Now what's your story?"

When Su-yin was done, Rico whistled. "Kindness. Courage. Self-sacrifice. This day grows more inexplicable with every passing moment." Then, "You look hungry. Let me stake you to a meal."

"Don't do it, babe," Beelzebub said. "It's an old jailhouse con. When you first arrive, everything's a gift. But come midnight, Shylock here is going to want his pound of flesh. If you know what I mean."

Rico's face twisted with annoyance. "Okay, now *that* kind of language is more like what I'd expect hereabouts." He turned back to Su-yin. "I wash dishes at the Greasy Spoon. There's an opening there for a waitress, if you want it. The pay's not much, but it comes with three meals a day. Such as they are."

Su-yin realized then that she was likely to be stuck in Hell for a long time. "Well . . ."

"A hundred a week plus meals and tips, if any," the cook said. He didn't tell Su-yin his name, nor did he ask for hers. "Also, you get to sleep in the storage room. Anybody craps on the floor, you clean it up. I catch you hawking a loogie in the food, you get docked an hour's wages. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then welcome to the finest fucking restaurant in Hell. Get your ass to work. And get that filthy fucking cat outta here!" The cook grabbed a hot frying pan off the grill and flung it at Beelzebub, who disappeared in a yowl of fur and defiance.

Work Su-yin did, for twelve hours every day, waiting on sullen customers and bussing the counter, scrubbing the floors, unclogging the toilets, and putting out the trash. Serving as a jill-of-all-trades, so long as the trade was boring.

In her free time, she scoured the city, searching for her father or the Devil in dark, joyless bars, unventilated parking garages, and basement sweatshops where drab men turned out shoddy furniture and shoes whose laces broke the first time they were tied. Slowly, steadily, she could feel the grayness of the place sinking deeper and deeper into her flesh until it was a constant ache in the marrow of her bones.

The boundaries of Hell ebbed and flowed like the tides, so that the way everything hooked up changed day by day. The city abutted the world Su-yin had come from, but different parts of it on different days. Sometimes she found herself staring yearningly into Los Angeles and other times at the outskirts of Moscow. One day the city abruptly ended in desert—she had no idea which one—and Su-yin found herself contemplating a lone flower whose stalk was the exact same color green as the soda straws back at the Greasy Spoon.

She stared at it for a long time, thinking.

Su-yin showed up early for her next shift and rummaged through the trash, looking for brightly colored packaging. Then she set to work. When she was done, Dolores, a dried husk of a woman who was the other waitress on duty and had yet to say more than four words in a row to Su-yin, stuck her head into the kitchen and said, "You guys gotta see this."

The cook came out of the kitchen and said, "What's that goddamn heap a shit?"

"It's a bouquet of flowers," Su-yin said. "Sort of. I made it out of soda straws and whatnot. The vase used to be a sour pickle jar."

From behind the cook, Rico said, "What's it for?"

"It's just for pretty." She pinched the cook's cheek. "Sort of like Cookie here."

Dolores's mouth fell open. Rubbing the side of his face, the cook said, "What the fuck was that for?"

"No reason. Just felt like it." A customer came in and she brought him a menu. "What'll you have, Sweetie?" For the rest of the day she called the Greasy Spoon's patrons "Hon," and "Sugarpie," and "Darlin'." She had a smile for everyone, and when she mopped the counter she sang. She made little jokes. If there was anything she could do to make the diner a happier place, Su-yin did it. It wasn't easy. But she made the effort.

The next day she did the same. And the day after. And the day after that one, too. After a time, the regulars would smile wanly at the sight of her. A couple of them even made unconvincing attempts to flirt with her. One left a tip—it was a slug, of course, but the gesture was good. Smiling, Su-yin tossed it in the air, caught it one-handed, and shoved it in a pocket.

At last, the Devil took the bait.

Su-yin was wiping blood from the dingy Formica countertop when the Dire Lady walked into the diner. Quickly stashing the cleaning rag under the counter, she said, "What can I get you, ma'am?"

The Devil sat and, after a bodyguard lit a fresh cigarette, exhaled a slow, lingering, sensuous serpent of smoke. "Boodles martini, very dry, straight up, with a twist. I want it so cold that it hurts."

"Yes, ma'am." Su-yin turned back toward the kitchen and was not surprised to find that she was in a gleaming—and impeccably clean!—bar. Everything in Hell, appar-

ently, conformed to its Mistress's wishes. Fortunately, Su-yin had for years made her father's cocktails for him every evening, so she knew what to do. With swift efficiency, she mixed the drink and brought the brim-full glass to the Devil without spilling a drop.

Crimson lips opened moistly. Gin slid down that long, long throat. Perfectly manicured nails plucked the lemon rind from the drink to be nibbled by even white teeth. All against her will, Su-yin admired the elegance of the performance.

The Devil dropped an envelope on the counter. "Read it."

Cautiously, Su-yin shook the document open. It was notarized, but she'd know the general's handwriting anywhere. His phrasing too:

My dearest daughter:
What are you doing? Go home. You can accomplish nothing here.
I used to love you, but there is no love in this place.
Sincerely,
Your Father

Su-yin put the letter down and looked the Devil in the eye. "All this tells me is that I've gotten your attention."

The Devil snorted. "Your attempts at meliorating the pervasive misery of my domain are annoying, yes. But that's all. You think you can defy me? Empires have fallen for less."

"Where is my father?" Su-yin said without trembling.

"He's right behind you."

Su-yin spun around and she was in a hospital room. It smelled of antiseptic and ironed sheets. People walked by unhurriedly in the corridor outside. A television grumbled on the wall. An unseen machine wheezed regularly, a half-beat off the rhythm of her own breath. Lying in a bed, skin palest white, eyes closed, was her father.

She ran to him and clasped one large, unresponsive hand in both of her own.

Those eyes, which in life had always been so cunning and wise, opened the merest slit. Dark pupils slid down the curve of eyelids. "Foolish child, why are you doing this?" the general mumbled.

"I'm going to bring you home, Daddy."

"This is my home now. I am here because I deserve to be here."

"No!"

"You are old enough now to suspect how I made a living. I assure you that I did everything you fear I did, and worse. You cannot save me nor can you undo time."

"I will! I will! I will!" Hot tears of rage and denial coursed down Su-yin's face. "I haven't come this far to be turned away now. I don't know how, but somehow I'll—"

"*Stop that.*" The general was gone and she was back in the bar, transfixed by the Devil's glare. Without any change in how she felt, Su-yin was no longer crying. "What will it take to get you to leave?"

Controlling her emotions as best she could, Su-yin said, "My father."

The Devil threw her martini in Su-yin's face.

The gin was so cold that it stung and for an instant Su-yin feared that it had been magically turned into acid. But she managed not to cry out or to turn away. Fumbling under the bar, she found the cleaning rag and used it to dry off her face.

"I suppose this is what they call love. It looks a lot like pigheadedness." The Devil tapped her nails against the obsidian top of the bar, click, click, *click*. "All right," She said. "I'll deal."

Su-yin waited in silence.

"You are a virgin. Don't think that makes you special here. There are plenty of vir-

gins in Hell. But I'll set you a challenge. Stay a virgin for an entire year and I'll let you take your father away—alive, unharmed, all of that. But if you behave like the slut I'm convinced you are, you agree to simply, meekly, leave."

"I—"

"There are other conditions. You have to go out with anyone who asks you. You'll keep your job here, but I'm giving you the use of a penthouse apartment I maintain as a *pied-a-terre* so you'll have a nice place to bring a boy home to. Don't you dare touch any of my clothes."

"Thank you."

"I'm also giving you a tutor. To teach you, among other things, manners."

Leonid was thin, graceful, acerbic and, Su-yin suspected, gay. He was waiting in the penthouse when she got there. "We will start," he said, "with the foxtrot."

"Can't I just . . . you know? Kids today mostly just wing it."

"No." Leonid took her in his arms, turned one way, turned the other. Her body naturally followed his. "Your partner controls where you go. If he knows what he's doing, you follow fluidly. Your every motion is easy and graceful as you yield to his movements. The metaphoric content is, I hope, obvious. All the while, your bodies press together. He is constantly aware of your breasts against him, your thighs, your everything. You, in turn, cannot help knowing when he becomes physically aroused."

"I don't think you're very aroused by me," Su-yin said, amused.

"That is not my job. Nor is it yours. You are only to arouse those who ask you out. And I am not going to ask you out."

There was a knock on the door. "Room service," Leonid announced. He let in a deferential servant who swiftly unloaded the contents of a wheeled cart onto a table: linen napkin, silverware, a selection of cheeses on a wood tray, crystal glasses, a carafe of water, a split of champagne.

"I'm not old enough to drink alcohol," Su-yin said.

"Here, you are. One of the many things I am to teach you is how to drink. In moderation, it goes without saying. You must never have more than two glasses in an evening and *never* accept anything you have not seen poured. Drugged drinks are a fact of life."

"Oh," Su-yin said in a small voice.

"I will also teach you some rudimentary self-defense. But only after you have learned how to dance. Dancing is fundamental." Leonid gestured toward the food. "Well? Have at it."

"Aren't you going to have some too?"

"No. I will stand here and critique how you eat."

Her first date was with a man who said his name was Archer. "Just Archer," he said when she asked for his full name. They met in the building's lobby which looked like it was meant for billionaires, smelled faintly of sour milk, and had Ferrante and Teicher playing on the sound system. He was dressed like a mobster, in a black suit with matching shirt and white tie. He opened his jacket to show her his gun. Then he started to tug out his shirt to show her his tattoos.

"Not now," Su-yin said. "Maybe when we know each other better." Which sounded stupid but was the only thing she could think of to say. She made a mental note to ask Leonid for better responses to such situations.

In the street outside, a cabbie leaned on his horn, long and hard.

"Milady, thy chariot awaits," Archer declaimed. Then he grabbed her arm and yanked her outside. When he helped her into the car, he stroked her bottom.

They went to a restaurant where her date proceeded to order for her, saying, "I've

eaten here before and you haven't." Archer chose foods she didn't like, and tried to get her to drink from a flask which, when she refused, he returned to his jacket pocket without sampling. When she had to go to the toilet, he said, "Mind if I come along? I enjoy watching women pee."

Su-yin stayed in the ladies' room for as long as she dared. When she returned to the table, Archer had eaten all the veggies off her plate and there were several empty cocktail glasses in front of him. "Say," he said, whipping out his smartphone, "do you want to see some pictures of my mother?"

One glimpse of the screen was enough to make Su-yin whip away her head, reddening. "Not pictures like that."

"Aw, c'mon. We're in Hell. You can get away with anything here."

The meal went on forever. Whenever the waitress came by, Archer leered at her and ordered drinks for the both of them. Then, when his was empty and Su-yin's still untouched, he drank hers as well. In the cab home, he began to cry because when he was alive his father had molested him, and it had screwed up his sex life. Then, when he dropped her off, he grabbed her arms and tried to kiss her. She closed her lips tight and turned away from his mouth, so he licked the side of her face. "At least let me smell your panties," he said.

With a shriek, Su-yin pushed him away and fell backward out of the cab. She lurched to her feet and, abandoning one of her shoes, ran inside. Behind her Archer shouted, "Come back! You haven't paid the cabbie!"

Inside the Devil's condo, Su-yin's tutor was waiting. "I won't ask how it went," he said.

"Oh, Leonid, it was awful." He handed her a dressing gown. There was an antique Chinese dressing screen in one corner of the room. Su-yin went behind it and undressed, draping her dress and underwear over the top the way starlets did in old black-and-white movies. "The only good thing to be said about the whole experience is that I was never once in the least bit tempted to have sex with him."

"Don't get cocky. The Devil likes to play games. She'll soften you up with some really awful experiences and then slip in a ringer. A nice dancer, a good listener, a fella who seems to be on your side. That's the one you've got to look out for." Leonid gathered up her clothes. "I'll take these things out to be laundered."

He withdrew then.

Su-yin took a shower to get the smell of Archer and his cigars off her skin. Then she went to bed, praying that she wouldn't have nightmares about him but sure that she would.

Still. One day down and not quite a year to go.

At least three times a week, Su-yin had dates, all of them hideous. One man exposed himself to her, then called her a slut for not sleeping with him. Another got drunk and tried to rip her dress off, right out on the street. A third got her name wrong and no matter how many times she corrected him, insisted on calling her Ching-chong. He wanted to know if it was "true what they say about Asian girls," and got offended when she told him that whatever they said, she was pretty sure it was wrong. To say nothing of the woman who kept trying to get Su-yin to smell her fingers.

On those nights when she stayed in, Leonid gave her lessons. He showed her the proper way to snort cocaine, the basics of flirtation, the fast way to do up her hair in a French twist. She was taught that a stiletto heel can be driven right through a man's shoe, the social proprieties of makeup, and which of the seven basic perfume categories (Floral, Fern, Chypre, Leather, Woody, Oriental, and Citrus) were appropriate for different situations.

She also learned to play the piano, though the opportunity to do so never arose on a date.

"Why am I learning all this stuff?" Su-yin demanded one evening, while they were playing chess. "It's not like I'm ever going to use it."

"Having skills gives you confidence and having confidence makes you alluring." Leonid slid a bishop forward, putting her queen in mate. "That's all."

"I don't want to be alluring." Rather than move her queen, which was protecting her king, Su-yin blocked the attack with a knight.

"Rules of the game, sweetie. Rules of the game." Leonid advanced a pawn, opening a line of attack for his own queen and suddenly the game looked entirely different. "Mate in three. You've got to learn to think at least four moves ahead."

One day, Beelzebub was waiting outside the Greasy Spoon when Su-yin got off work. "Thought I'd warn ya," he said. "Rico's building up his courage to ask you out."

"Is he?" Su-yin said, surprised. "I thought better of him."

"I can see what you're thinking. No, the Devil didn't order him to nail your little virgin tushie. She didn't have to. Setting aside this idiot challenge you got yourself roped into, Rico is young and male. You're young and lovely. You're gonna have your work cut out for you, keeping his hands outa your undies."

Caught by surprise, Su-yin asked, "Am I really lovely?"

"To him, yes. To a cat, not so much."

She laughed and rubbed Beelzebub's head. "That's one of the things I like best about you, Belzie—your unfailing honesty."

"I'm only honest because it's an offense against local community standards."

When she began her shift, Rico came out from the back room, drying his hands on his apron. "Listen," he said. "There's this dance club I know. I was thinking maybe this Friday I could take you there. To dance."

"Oh, Rico." Su-yin sighed. "I'd love to."

So that Saturday they went to the Top of the Town, which was a revolving sky bar with a spectacular view of the river Phlegethon and the delicate blue flames that flickered upon its waters. They danced for a while, and Rico kept stepping on her feet. Then a handsome Algerian named Jean-Luc cut in. He danced beautifully. Which was why Rico punched him out and then hustled Su-yin away to a smoky piano bar for cocktails. There, she took tiny sips from a glass of pinot grigio while Rico got plowed on highballs.

Finally, they took a rusted-out old taxi back to Su-yin's apartment and, true to Beelzebub's prediction, she had to fight to keep Rico's hands out of her dress. When they got out of the cab, she told him she'd had a lovely time and slipped quickly inside, directing the doorman not to let him follow. Behind her, she could hear him throwing up.

Back in her apartment, she kicked off her high heels and, without bothering to undress, threw herself down on the bed. The instant she closed her eyes, she could feel sleep closing about her.

One more day down. Far too many yet to go.

Rico was hung over the next morning, and had a black eye from his encounter with the doorman. So he didn't ask Su-yin out again, which was just as well because she got a call from the Algerian, insisting that they go clubbing.

They went to the Dew Drop Inn, the Hotsy-Totsy Club, the Orchid Lounge, Swank City, the Top Hat, and the Roadhouse and danced to the music of Pat Boone, Doris Day, Barry Manilow, Patti Page, and Wayne Newton. To Su-yin's surprise, Jean-Luc behaved like a perfect gentleman. "When I was alive, I was a jewel thief and a cat

burglar," he told her. "A very good one, too. I learned that one has to handle beautiful things with a light touch.

"It would be counterproductive for me to throw myself at you, grasping and snorting," he said. "Though I assure you there is nothing I desire more. I must instead convince *you* to seduce *me*. Which is, notwithstanding the fact that you are unaware of it, something you most dearly desire to do."

"It's not going to happen. My father's soul is at stake."

"That's a problem, of course." The Algerian winked roguishly. "I'll just have to be more charming."

"That hardly seems possible," Su-yin said, amused. But she stayed on her guard.

Jean-Luc had a wealth of stories of rooftop robberies and midnight escapes through the squalid alleys of Paris and Algiers. He asked her questions about her life and seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say. He told her that once, when he was wanted, he had hidden in a brothel in Marseille for a month—"the longest month of my life!"—without touching any of its employees. "I was in love, you see, desperately so. Only, when it was safe to come out, Mignette had moved in with a gendarme. She meant to wait for me, but—thirty days? Every woman had her limits."

The Algerian was nice and, under other circumstances, Su-yin didn't see that giving in to him would be entirely wrong. She felt much the same urges he did. So long as she didn't get pregnant or catch a disease, why not?

But she was in a contest with the Devil and it was one she was determined to win.

"This is a feint," Leonid said, during their next foil lesson. "I thrust and you respond with a parry four, knocking my blade outward, or so you expect." He demonstrated in slow motion. "But when you do, I dip my blade under yours and up again on the inside—and lunge." The button of his foil touched Su-yin's jacket, right above her heart.

He stepped back, pulling off his mask. "The whole purpose of the feint—of your Algerian, you understand my metaphor?—is to bring you off guard. To distract you from the real threat."

"Which is?"

"You'll recognize it when it happens. Provided you stay alert."

"Leonid, I never asked you this before, but . . . why are you doing this? Giving me advice, I mean. I know why you're giving me lessons."

"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate. Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. It was very disappointing to discover that Dante's sign didn't exist, and even more so to discover that some faint ghost of hope remains. Your father no more deserves to escape here than I do. But if he did, that would be a kind of revenge upon Miss Spite, and I would derive some thin, sour satisfaction from that." Leonid shrugged. "That's all."

"Heads up again," Beelzebub said. "Young Lochinvar's hot for a second serving." And before Su-yin could respond, he was gone.

Sure enough, Rico asked her out again. "Just over to my apartment. To hang out. Nothing fancy. I won't try anything, I promise."

"I'll go if you want," Su-yin said. "But last time was such a disaster. Why repeat it?"

"Because being with you makes me feel better," Rico said. "Not happy, of course, that's not possible here. But less miserable. Sometimes I think that if only I could make you happy then I'd be happy too, almost. Just a little bit."

So she went.

Rico's apartment was every bit as squalid as she'd expected: filthy dishes clogging the sink, unwashed clothes kicked into the corners. But he'd made a sort of coffee table out of a crate and a Parcheesi board from a discarded pizza box. "I got the idea

from you," he said. "From your fake flowers. The dice are made from that tasteless white root that Cookie uses in his stew. Turnip, maybe? Parsnip? The pips are stale peppercorns."

After so many dates with older men, Rico's youth—his callowness—was painfully obvious. He talked too much about himself. He knew nothing about what passed in Hell for current events. When Su-yin mentioned the race for the meaningless office of Persecutor General, he didn't even know who was running, much less which of the candidates had already bought the election. He gloated whenever the dice favored him.

Still, Rico didn't try to grope her, and played the game with real enthusiasm, and on those rare times when Su-yin managed to turn the conversation around to topics of interest to her, he listened to what she had to say with genuine interest. So it could have been worse.

When it was finally late enough that Su-yin figured she could call it a night without hurting Rico's feelings, she asked to be taken home. They walked back to her apartment building and when they got there, Rico said, "Tonight was really nice. I mean, it was almost pleasant. Really. It was easily the least awful time I've had since dying."

Su-yin blocked his clumsy attempt to kiss her. Then, she planted a swift peck on his cheek and fled inside.

"We should do this again sometime!" Rico shouted after her.

When she got back to the apartment, Su-yin cried for hours. For the first time, her life here really did feel like Hell.

So it went. A blind date who took her not to a restaurant but to an orgy where old men stood about naked, waiting for young women to service them. As they did, unenthusiastically and in a variety of ways that Su-yin could not have imagined six months earlier. She stayed for as long as she could stand to watch and then demanded to be taken home. Followed by a truly delightful evening with Jean-Luc. Then a man who liked to tear off his own scabs and eat them. A woman who said she wouldn't be a lesbian if it weren't for Su-yin and demanded to know how she planned to make it up to her. A Lord of the Inner Circles who was offended she hadn't heard of him. A creature of uncertain gender who suggested things that Su-yin didn't think she understood and certainly didn't want to do. Jean-Luc again, and a yacht party at which they played games where the losers were thrown into the acidic waters of the Acheron. Another sad evening with Rico, where they played pinochle with cards he had made from discarded paper plates, and he shared every regret he had from an innocently misspent youth.

All too slowly, the months passed. Sometimes the dates were so awful that Su-yin threw up afterward. Other times, they were not so bad. Always, she managed to be cheerful while she worked, whether she felt like it or not. Sticking it to the Devil was how she thought of it. Though, whether out of spite or a heavy workload, that Fearsome Lady never showed her face.

On the next to last evening of the competition, the Algerian told Su-yin to dress formally and then drove her out of town to a trash dump to shoot rats. Su-yin knew how to shoot because her father had insisted on it, and of course the Devil's penthouse had an indoor firing range, so she'd kept in practice. Still, it was a bit of a letdown. "I feel silly being here dressed like this," she said.

"Don't." Jean-Luc was carrying a matched pair of Anschutz bolt-action rimfires. He handed her one. "The contrast only makes you look all the more elegant."

Su-yin checked the sight, made sure the rifle had a full clip, and thumbed the safety off. "How do we do this?"

"Mes frères!" Two men stepped out of darkness. Each carried a gasoline can. "Michel and Thierry will be our beaters tonight." He gestured toward a mound of garbage. "Let's start with that one."

The beaters trudged over to the mound and began sloshing gasoline on it.

"How this is done is as follows: When the garbage is set afire, it will drive out the rats living in tunnels within. They emerge with their fur aflame, so they are easy to spot. But they will be running as fast as they can, so they will not be easy to shoot. That's what makes it sporting. I'll target those that break right, you take the others. The winner is whoever pots the most rats. Ready?"

Su-yin raised her rifle. "I guess."

"Excellent." He raised his voice. "Light the fire!"

It should have been grotesque. It should have been disgusting. But against all expectations, it wasn't. Hell's rats were filthy creatures, even more loathsome than their terrestrial counterparts, so shooting them didn't make Su-yin feel bad at all. Plus, they were difficult enough to hit that there was genuine satisfaction when she did get one. By her third kill, Su-yin was laughing with every shot.

"To your left!" her beater cried as more rats shot, burning, from the trash fire. "Three!"

Su-yin led a flaming rodent with her rifle, squeezed the trigger, and watched it flip over in the air. She made a slap shot at the second and missed, while the third got clean away. Another rat tried to escape and she got it in one. Then she was out of ammunition. She held out her hand and Thierry slapped a fresh clip into it.

"I pegged four," the Algerian said. "You?"

"Five. So far."

"I'm impressed." The Algerian's face glistened in the light of the trash fire, but he held himself with perfect aplomb. He might have been modeling his suit for a fashion shoot. "I think this mound's about played out. Time to light up a second one."

By the time they were done, Su-yin was sweaty and bedraggled and her dress reeked so of burning garbage she doubted it could be salvaged. But she was also ahead by a dozen rats. Michel and Thierry took their rifles and the Algerian led Su-yin back to his Maserati.

As he drove, the Algerian placed his hand on Su-yin's thigh and squeezed. She supposed she should have told him not to, but tonight had been so much fun—the only time she'd actually enjoyed herself since coming to Hell—that she felt she owed him at least that much. Anyway, it felt good.

At the door to her apartment building, the Algerian took Su-yin into his arms and said, "This is your last chance to invite me up to your room."

"Oh, Jean-Luc, you know I'd like to."

"Then do. It's that simple."

"I can't."

The Algerian released her, lit a cigarette, took a long drag, exhaled. "I swore I would wait until you beckoned me. I thought I had that much pride. But as it turns out, your self-control is stronger than mine. So it is I who must beg. Please. I know you are not . . . experienced. That doesn't matter. I can give you the first night every young woman deserves: passionate, romantic, lingering. Allow me to introduce you to the pleasures of being an adult in a manner you will cherish forever."

Su-yin found herself responding to his words more than she would have expected. Worse, when she tried to conjure up her father's image to help strengthen her resolve, she couldn't. After all this time, she was beginning, it seemed, to forget the general. This was a terrifying thought. But she could not deny it.

The Algerian's eyes twinkled cynically. The cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth made him look every inch a scoundrel. The kind of scoundrel that women

like. "By now we have spent enough time together," Su-yin said, "for you to know that when I say no I mean it."

"Oh, well. Alas." Jean-Luc shrugged. "Would you mind if I stubbed my cigarette out on the back of your hand?"

"What? No!"

"*Quel dommage.*" Taking her hand as if to kiss it, the Algerian stubbed out his cigarette on its back.

Back at the apartment, Leonid rubbed salve on her burn. "Tomorrow you'll wear gloves, of course."

"I can't believe Jean-Luc did that to me. I thought he was nice! And all the while . . ."

"He showed his true colors. He's gone. Forget him. Tomorrow is your final date. You can be sure that the Devil has something special in mind."

"Who will it be?"

"I don't know. Nobody tells me anything. One gets used to it. But your date will pick you up in the lobby at seven. Be on your guard. Remember everything I taught you. Whoever he is, he'll be almost irresistible. Resist him. Don't forget that your victory is my victory too. In a small, petty, and unworthy way."

The next night—her final one in Hell—Su-yin came home from work to find Leonid looking pale and fearful. "It was Her Nibs," he explained. "She came by and she was *not* in a pleasant mood." He nodded toward the bedroom. "She laid out a dress for you to wear tonight."

Draped across the bed was a silk gown of deepest scarlet. The skirt was long and had a slit up one side. Su-yin could see at a glance that she was not supposed to wear any underwear with it. The silk flowed like water; its thread count had to be astronomical. When she put it on, it fit her so elegantly that she felt three inches taller.

It made her feel wanton.

It took some time to get her makeup right. But when Su-yin slipped on her heels and, blushing, emerged at last into the living room, Leonid's astonishment made it all worthwhile. "I begin to understand," he said, "what heterosexual men see in you creatures."

Then he was fussing over her hair, pinning it up, *tsk*ing over imperfections that only he could see, speaking rapidly all the while. "Tonight's not going to be easy. The Devil has her wiles. Don't let yourself be drawn off guard. Think four moves ahead—five, if you can manage it. Watch the alcohol. Don't do drugs of any sort. There's no place to hide a weapon in that dress, but your do is held together with a hairpin that's as good as a dagger in a pinch. You could kill a man with it, but I really think you should avoid doing that if at all possible. It would spoil your coif. Is this a split end? Don't think that you can get into a heavy petting session and pull out of it before it's too late. That's the oldest self-delusion in the book. Remember, Miss Venom will be watching. Don't do anything that would make her happy."

At last, he stepped back and said, "It'll do."

There was a triple mirror in one corner of the room. Su-yin stood before it, stunned, for one long minute. Then, slowly, she spun about in order to see herself from every angle. She was perfect. She wished she could look like this forever. She knew she would remember this moment for the rest of her life.

Then the concierge called up to say that her date had arrived. Su-yin promised to be right down.

"Be on your guard!" Leonid called after her as she stepped into the elevator.

"I will!" she cried. "Don't worry!"

As the doors closed, she heard him say, "We don't know who you've been set up with, but we know he'll be dangerously hard to resist."

* * *

It was Rico.

He wore a baby blue tuxedo that he explained was a rental. He also brought along a corsage, which he clumsily pinned to her gown. "How can you afford all this?" Su-yin asked, when the limousine pulled up.

"I've been saving up all year. No big deal. It's not as if there's much of anything else to spend it on."

They went to the Cavern, a boutique club with flashing lights, distressing art on the walls, and live nude dancers in iron cages hung from the ceiling over the bar. They looked a hundred times sexier than Su-yin would ever be but after his first glance Rico never looked at them again. All his attention was on her.

The music was hot and desperate when they entered and the club was thronged with sweaty bodies moving frantically. But when they stepped onto the dance floor, the tempo changed, so that they had no choice but to slow dance, holding each other close.

"You've been practicing!" Su-yin exclaimed. Rico was nowhere near as good as the Algerian, of course. But he didn't step on her feet even once. And though she could tell he was aroused—how not? her dress covered everything and hid nothing—he did not let it influence how he behaved toward her.

"Well, I didn't want tonight to be a fiasco like the last time. You know?"

By twos and threes, the other dancers drifted back to their tables, until finally there was nobody but they two on the floor, holding onto each other and watched by hundreds of envious eyes. Above them, the women in their cages rubbed themselves against the bars, moaning with desire. At the bar, ice cubes rattled and drinks were poured. The band played slow number after slow number until, wearied, Su-yin suggested they take a breather.

When Rico broke free of her eyes, he seemed baffled to realize they had been dancing all alone. But he led Su-yin to a table, where she ordered a moonflower, a cocktail made from champagne, elderflower liqueur, and a peeled litchi, and Rico asked for a cola.

Once they were seated, the music grew raucous again, and the clubbers filled the dance floor to its capacity and beyond.

"So this is your last night, huh?" Rico said when their drinks had come.

"I guess."

"What are you going to do when you get back?"

"I hadn't given it any thought. Go back to school, I guess. A lot depends on what my father wants." It was, Su-yin realized with surprise, going to be difficult to go back to being a dutiful daughter after a year in which she'd been free to do whatever she wanted. She imagined the general would be grateful for having been saved from eternal damnation. But she didn't for an instant think that meant he would be any more permissive toward her. Certainly, he wouldn't let her go to clubs like this. The general had expected her to refrain from dating until she was in college—and only then because he knew he couldn't be there to watch over her.

Unexpectedly, Su-yin felt a twinge of regret for the freedoms she would be losing when she returned home.

She stood. "Let's go outside. I need some fresh air. Less stale air, I mean."

Out on the street, they wandered aimlessly down crumbling sidewalks and past shuttered buildings ugly with graffiti. Half the streetlights were out. When Rico tried to put his arm around her waist, Su-yin moved away from him. She didn't think so small a gesture would do any harm, but this late in the game she wasn't taking any chances.

They came to the waterfront and stopped. There, by the oily black waters of the

Acheron. Rico found a discarded shopping cart, which they turned on its side and used for a bench. "I'll miss you," he said. "But it was kind of a miracle you were here in the first place, wasn't it? You don't feel the miseries or see the abominations the rest of us do. Just being in your presence I can imagine a little bit what it must be like to be you. Glorious."

Su-yin didn't feel the least bit glorious. But she refrained from saying so. She leaned lightly against Rico, cherishing his solidity, hoping the warmth of her body would provide him some small comfort. "Let's not talk about that. Tell me something else instead."

"Okay." After a brief silence, Rico said, "I grew up in Baltimore. People think that big cities are divorced from nature but that's not true. There are butterflies in the spring and in autumn the trees turn bright gold and red. Sometimes in the winter it snows so hard that all the traffic stops. The streets are covered in sheets of purest white and the silence . . . the silence is . . . I can't do this."

"What?"

"I can't do this to you. I'm sorry."

Rico stood and turned away from Su-yin, drawing her up in his wake. Carefully, she said, "What are you talking about?"

"The Devil came to see me today."

"Oh," Su-yin said.

"I'd never seen her before. But she walks in the door and you know who she is, don't you? She told me that if I could score with you tonight, she'd let me out of this place. You can't imagine how it felt, hearing that. She said that we'd leave the club and wind up here. That I should talk about my childhood, crap like that. That the words would just come to me. But this is not what I want. Well, I do want it. But not like this."

Rico looked so forlorn that Su-yin started to take him into her arms to comfort him. He was such a sweet boy, she thought, such an innocent. It came to her in that moment that she had a choice. She could free her father from Hell or she could free Rico. Either way, she'd feel guilty about leaving one of them behind. Either way, it would be an epic accomplishment. And if she were to choose Rico . . .

"You prick! You bastard!" Su-yin pushed Rico away from her and then punched him in the chest as hard as she could. "This is part of the script, isn't it?" All her emotions were in a jumble. She didn't know whether to laugh or to barf. "Well, you can just go—"

"Daughter."

Su-yin whirled, and there was the general, looming over her like a thunderhead. Her heart soared at the sight of him, even as she took an involuntary step back from his frown. She wanted to hug him, but even when he was alive that was an impertinence he would not allow in such a mood.

"Take a good long look at yourself, young lady. Out unescorted, at night, with this hooligan. Using bad language. Dressed like a prostitute. Living in . . . this place. Is this the life you imagine I had planned for you?"

"I—"

"I left you well provided for. Then I came here to be punished for doing things I should not have done. This is not only the way things are, it is the way they should be." The general wavered in Su-yin's sight like a candle flame, her eyes were so full of tears. "Do not speak! I am going to tell you what to do and you are to obey me without question. Do you understand?"

"I . . . yes."

"I have experience being in positions where there are no good choices. All you can do is negotiate the best deal you can. Have sex with this inappropriate young man.

Then go home and never do anything shameful like that again. Many good women have such incidents in their past. Even your mother did things she later regretted." The general turned to Rico. "You."

"Sir?"

"Give my daughter your hand."

He did so.

"Go into the nearest apartment building. The lobby will be clean and the doorman will give you the key to a decent room. There you will do what you must. There will be a condom on the nightstand—use it. Afterward, my daughter will lead you out of Hell. You can show your gratitude by never trying to see her again."

Rico nodded assent and turned to go.

But when he did, Su-yin did not follow. Pulling her hand free of his, she said to her father, "How do you know all this? About the room, the condom, the nightstand?"

"Don't ask foolish questions. Just do as you're told."

An icy rage surged up within Su-yin. "You're in league with the Devil, both of you. Maybe Rico doesn't know it, but you certainly do. Good cop, bad cop. One of you weak, the other harsh." When her father's face went hard as granite, he looked like a gaunt version of Frankenstein's monster. How could she not have seen this before? "After all I've gone through for you!"

Rico reached out pleadingly toward Su-yin. But the general shoved him aside. Then, unthinkably, he raised up a hand to slap her.

Su-yin screamed and flinched away. Before the slap could land, she kicked off her heels and ran. Barefoot, she sped down the street, away from the both of them, as fast as she could go.

Four moves ahead, she thought wildly. Don't let yourself be drawn off guard. The hell with Rico and, for that matter, the hell with her father too. She wasn't going to be fooled as easily as *that.*

Back at the penthouse, Leonid was waiting. "Well?" he said anxiously.

All the way up in the elevator, Su-yin had been a bundle of hysteria and misery, equally mixed. Now, however . . .

In trembling disbelief, she said, "I passed the test."

They broke out the Cristal and, laughing, drank down glass after glass. Leonid put on some music and they stumblingly danced the tango. Then they collided with the couch and tumbled down atop it and somehow they were kissing. Clothing got pushed this way and that way and then Leonid had his hands under her dress and she was fumbling with his zipper. It was wrong and she knew it, she'd never even thought of Leonid in that way, and yet somehow she couldn't seem to stop herself.

They did it right there on the couch.

It wasn't that great.

When they were done, Leonid gathered up his scattered clothes, dressed, and said, "It's almost midnight. I suggest you be out of Hell by morning."

Shocked, Su-yin said, "You . . . that was *planned!* All year you pretended to be my friend, when you knew from the start that you were going to . . . going to . . . do that."

"Believe it or not, I did you a huge favor," Leonid said. "The Devil would never have let you win. If you had held out against me, she would have arranged for you to be very brutally gang-raped. The only reason that didn't happen as soon as you cut a deal with her was that she wanted to teach you a lesson. Let's be honest here: You never had a chance. The Devil likes to play games. But all her games are rigged."

He adjusted his cravat, bowed, and left.

* * *

Su-yin had been told to leave Hell and she would. But she hadn't been told how to go about it. So she went to see Rico.

His face brightened when he saw her in the doorway of his sad little apartment, then dimmed again when she told him the reason she had come. "Any direction you take will lead you away from here," he said. There was a hurt look in the back of his eyes, but he said nothing of what he must have been thinking. "You could just walk out."

"Like heck I could. I lost the challenge. I lost my father. I lost a year of my life. I am not going to spend a single minute more than I have to in this place. I want to be out of here just as fast as I can manage."

"I lost all that too," Rico mumbled, "and more."

Su-yin pretended she hadn't heard him. "What did you say?"

"I said yeah, I can help you."

On a shadowy street just off the clubbing sector, Su-yin stopped in front of a Lincoln Continental. She liked how it looked. Also, she wanted something big. "This one," she said. It took Rico only seconds to break into the Lincoln and hot-wire the ignition. "How about that?" he said. "I guess the old skills never go away."

"Open up the trunk for me, would you? I have something I want to put in the back." Su-yin said. When he had done so, she bent briefly inside. "Oh, no!" she cried. "I dropped my brooch, the one my mother left me when she died, and I can't reach it. Rico, you're tall. . . ."

Rico leaned far into the trunk, groping in its dark recesses. "I don't see anything."

"It's way in the back. It bounced there." Su-yin waited until Rico was stretched as far he could go and grabbed his ankles. With all her strength, she lifted him off the ground and toppled him over into the trunk. Then she slammed it shut.

A muffled voice said, "Hey!"

Su-yin climbed into the front of the car. As she did, a black streak of fur leaped over her and into the passenger seat. "You're not leaving without me," Beelzebub said.

"Of course not." Su-yin put the car into gear and started slowly down the road, ignoring the hammering from the trunk. "When we get home, I'm going to wash you and brush you and take a flea comb to your fur, though. Then I'll buy you a pint of cream."

"Make it a quart of scotch and you got a deal."

Su-yin shifted gears into second and then third. She sideswiped a parked Volkswagen van and, tires screeching, accidentally ran a red light. Luckily, there wasn't much traffic hereabouts at this time of night.

"Whoah!" Beelzebub cried. "Has anybody ever told you that you're the absolute worst driver in the universe?"

"You're the first." They were coming to the city limits now. Beyond lay what Su-yin was pretty sure was the Meadowlands. As they crossed into New Jersey, she floored the accelerator, sending two oncoming cars veering off the road to avoid collision. Then she pulled the Lincoln back into its lane and they were barreling down the road, a full moon bouncing in the sky overhead, only slightly out of control. She noted with satisfaction that Rico was still shouting at her from the trunk. Apparently, hot-wiring the car had been just enough to bring his karma into the positive digits. "I'm not doing too badly, though. Considering."

She had lost her father and she didn't think the pain of that would ever go away, not totally. But at least she had a boyfriend now. She wasn't quite sure just what one *did* with one, other than going dancing and having sex. But she'd find out soon enough, she supposed.

Su-yin rolled down the window to let the wonderful stink of marshes and rotting garbage into the car, reveling in the hot summer night, the way the wind batted her hair about, and the neon lights of Hell fading slowly behind her in the rearview mirror. ❍

SLOWLY UPWARD, THE COELACANTH

M. Bennardo

M. Bennardo is the writer of over forty published short stories. His newest is a tale about true determination. It marks his fourth appearance in *Asimov's*. The author lives in Cleveland, Ohio, but people everywhere can find him online at *http://www.mbennardo.com.*

She knew little, but she knew she had been put here by some god as a safeguard. The god had no name, or no name that she knew. Perhaps it hadn't even been a god. She only understood it as a being of immense power who lived above, an unknowable being who entered the water only when it wished, who had put her here as a safeguard, and who had then left. But she stayed, even though the god had never returned. That she had been put here was one of the few things she knew, and so she stayed.

The waters were dark and cold. She preferred it thus. At times she swam higher, into waters that were warmer and lighter, and she recalled the times when all the waters had been dark and cold. In those seasons she had swum high or low as she pleased, seeking scraps of food. Great storms had often lashed the sea, and angry rainfall turned the surface to a boiling blanket of lighter, fresher water. In places, close to the coastal shelves, great torrents of this fresh water poured off the land and brought much nourishment into the ocean, clouds of food particles blooming across the surface as far as anyone could swim. In the dark and cold times, she had ventured almost to the surface itself, feeding in great gulps and thriving amid this unexpected bounty.

But the bounty had not lasted. It had given out before the dark, cold times ended. Season followed season, and soon she had descended into the depths of the ocean again—not because the surface was too warm or light yet, but because there was no more food there. In the ocean the top dies first, and it was not long before all the surface became like a desert. It was only in deeper, darker places where life still survived on the remnants of dead things drifting down like rotting snow from above.

Though she swam in one direction, she found herself pulled in another. She was being dragged tail first through the water. Soon she bumped and collected against others—against other fish and other creatures. She was larger than most, a giantess of the deep now. Had she had any notion of time, she might have thought that she was older than most as well. But time was not important. There was simply the

cycle of instinct and the same motions day after day, season after season. There was no progression, no end to look forward to, no beginning to recall.

The dragging stopped and she felt herself lifted now, pulled slowly upward to the warmth and the light, as the pressure around her steadily decreased with each second of ascension. She was pulled up along with the other denizens of the ocean, gathered and netted indiscriminately—pulled up to regions she almost never chose to visit anymore. Some part of her protested. Had she not been put there as a safeguard? That was why she had never left, and she did not want to leave now.

Then, at last—the cataclysm. The breaking of the surface and the strange stinging as streams of water poured off her scales and out of her gills, rushed in a thick rivulet from her wide open mouth. Her gills flared at the open air, gaping vainly for breath. She hung a moment and then fell heavily, along with all the others, into a shallow tank. She lay still, sullenly, heaped on top of others, water barely covering her gills and mouth.

There was a noise, a voice, and almost immediately she felt herself lifted again—this time by five rough points inserted into each of her gills. She flopped rudely onto a dry, flat surface. Instinctively, she tried to wriggle off again, to fall from the high place to the lower—for water always collected lower. She had never been out of water before, but instinctively she knew where to seek it. But instead she was pressed out flat, and suddenly felt a thin, irritating blade pierce her belly. Before she knew what had happened, it had traveled the length of her body, and blood was flowing freely from her insides. There was no pain, just the irritation of penetration and then the surprise of evacuation.

Just before she slipped into complete darkness, she felt two rough probes slip inside the newly made cavity and extract—yes, they extracted the little glowing pebble that she had carried as a safeguard so long, season after season, as the surface water changed from light to dark to light again.

And then, with that, she was a fish no more.

She felt, for a moment, a strange affinity for all these things. There was some recollection of ships and people, some reassurance that she had been here before. She could not feel what it meant to be a human, but no more could she feel what it meant to be a coelacanth. She floated in between and unconnected, but there was some assurance somehow that she had done this before as well.

Suddenly she could see everything at once, and somehow she was even aware that the gutted fish had lived for a hundred and fifty years. She had lived for a hundred and fifty years. Circling, swimming, answering the call of dumb instinct—but with that one variation, that one iota of knowledge that she had been put there—put there by a god—put there as a safeguard.

Then at once the world collapsed and she was pinioned by straits of heavy flesh once more.

There was something new this time. The flesh was different. It had a different configuration and different capabilities and somehow a different scope. This last was the most troubling. The limbs and the lungs were unusual, but she felt that over time she would grow used to them. After all, they seemed fitted to this new body, and she felt her old fins and gills would have been less appropriate.

But there was a distinct shrinking of her horizons. Where once she had serenely let time wash through her, season by season, she now felt anxiety at every passing moment. There was only just enough time. Perhaps she would be vouchsafed more, but it could not be counted on. She needed to act now—needed to eat, to grow, to mate, to lay eggs. It was all imperative.

Then she remembered she was meant to be a safeguard. She looked around herself. There was moist earth and a small pool. There was a clump of wriggling earthworms—food. She ate. Beyond, there was confusion. Brightness and movement. Tentatively, she ventured toward it, pushing against the earth with her delicate, translucent orange limbs. She struck something—something invisible—and could go no further. This was the scope of her domain. It was here, clearly, that she had been placed as a safeguard.

Again, she was liberated from the flesh. Another blade penetrated her—this one accompanied by real pain, flashes of sharp feeling coursing along her nerves. The large creatures outside her domain—she sometimes recognized them as humans—probed her insides and again that bright pebble was extracted. As the flesh melted away, she wondered that she had ever felt it to be part of her. Her sojourn there had been so brief, and now she looked in wonder down at the newt body, inert and flaccid on the table. She looked almost with repulsion—what a strange creature to have been, this newt. Surely she had never been meant to be such a thing.

"I'm glad to be done with that," said one of the humans. "Those newts are too delicate—I always fear they'll die in the night."

"But necessary, nonetheless," said another human. "She must go slowly upward. Like a diver returning from the depths, she must go slowly."

But already, something else was waiting.

Everything seemed to be clear. Movement was no longer merely an instinctive flailing, as it had been for so long. Instead, it could be a deliberate progression. She could examine obstacles and attempt to surmount them by lifting one leg or the other, or by moving her head from side to side. She could go around, to the left or the right. She could dig. And, most importantly, she could choose which. Somehow, now, she had the capability to decide.

Now, she fed when she was hungry, and not merely when food was available. Leaves of uneaten lettuce lay in the dish where her food was placed. But she would eat it later. Again, her scope had expanded. She felt immense relief at knowing the years that lay before her—the time there was to do what she needed to do. It was because she was protected. If danger threatened, she simply had to retreat into her carapace and wait. She would be safe there, as she had once been safe in the depths of the ocean.

But that—that was confusing. It seemed like a false life. It was better not to think about it.

It was clear now as well that she was in a tank—an enclosure that limited her movement. There was no point in attempting to climb out of the tank. She had tried on each side, and could see that she would never succeed. Sometimes, however, the humans picked her up and placed her outside, on the floor of the room. But even here, she couldn't go far. And there was nothing to eat in the room, no water to swim in, no light to bask in, and no sand to lay eggs in. She preferred the tank in every way, except only that she wished it were larger.

And what of being a safeguard? She dimly suspected these humans were the gods who had placed her where she was. She had those confusing half memories of other bodies and other lives before she had been this tortoise. In those memories, there were humans. It seemed that whatever purpose she served, it must have been ordained by them. And they were always there—or almost always. Every day, she saw one or another of the humans—usually all three of them. Whatever they would want of her, they could find her anytime. She did not need to worry about this either.

* * *

Once more, the pebble was free. Suddenly, in her liberation, she knew she was a human too. It hit her suddenly, and it was both a surprise and so obvious in retrospect. She had not been born a coelacanth, nor a newt, nor a turtle. She had somehow, long ago—long, long ago—almost two hundred years ago—she had been born a human, just like these others.

She had been placed in the fish, not as a safeguard, but to be safeguarded. The fish was to safeguard her spark, her essence, through some terrible catastrophe. The fish was to take her through the fire and heat, and then the long coldness that would follow. There had been no room for her elsewhere, with the rest of the surviving humans. But there had been this one last chance, and she had been lucky to have it.

Someone had said the coelacanth had survived this before. If anything could survive again, it would be those sturdy fish. But they would come again later. The humans would return after winter had passed—the very lucky ones would come out of their caves or descend from the sky. They would trawl the oceans and they would pull up their lost cousins, the still-lucky but also not-so-lucky ones who had been given this last bare chance to survive in the depths.

It was a chance only. No one was sure if it would work. It was so far down into the coelacanth and then so far back up again. So many things could go wrong, but it was a chance and it was offered only to a few. To skip the chance was to die alongside billions. So she had taken it, had gone down into the coelacanth, and had lived through the catastrophe and the winter that followed. And here again were her cousins, passing the bright pebble of her soul from body to body to body, as high as they could pass it up, in the hopes they could find her again.

Something was the matter. Something was wrong. In her mind—there was something wrong.

She knew the names of the humans now. Donna, Harold, and George. When one of them pointed at the objects in front of her, she understood what they were asking. She could even hear the words they spoke. She could hear them and remember and repeat them. But it wasn't until one of them spoke the name for the objects that she could speak them back.

If they pointed at the round object first, she could only shift from foot to foot, her head weaving sideways in anxiety. She could only whistle and repeat the question in a nervous parrot's croak. "What is it? What is it?" But once they spoke the word—ball—then she could say it.

"What is it?" asked Harold.

"What is it? What is it?"

"Ball," said Harold, pointing and enunciating.

"Ball," she croaked back, the shame of failure rising inside her.

Why couldn't she say more? She could think now—could reason. She understood so much. When later they pointed to the ball and said "red," she understood that too. It wasn't another name for the object—it was a name for an attribute. It was a category. Things could be classified and categorized. Balls, nuts, humans, pretty birds. She understood it all.

But somewhere, something was wrong. The wiring in her mind wouldn't let her put thoughts into words. There was much she wanted to say—every day, more memories came back. In her sleep, she regressed further and further into her personal history. The turtle and the newt flashed by—the coelacanth persisted seemingly for eons—but there, before it all, was a woman. She remembered what she had remembered. She knew what she had known. Or most of it—much of it. As much as her parrot's mind could comprehend, which was a great deal more than she could express.

And they asked her. They asked: "What is your name?" They asked: "Who are you?"

She saw—she remembered. Not in words, but in images and feelings. And could only shift from foot to foot on her perch. She could only whistle sadly.

Finally, they said: "It isn't working." Not to her—to one another. She wanted to tell them that it was. It was working.

She shifted from foot to foot. She whistled. "Working," she croaked.

"It isn't working," said Harold, absent-mindedly feeding her a nut. "And there is no place else to put her."

"We need this parrot for another one," said Donna. "There are three more tortoises ready to bring up."

"Perhaps it hasn't been long enough," said George.

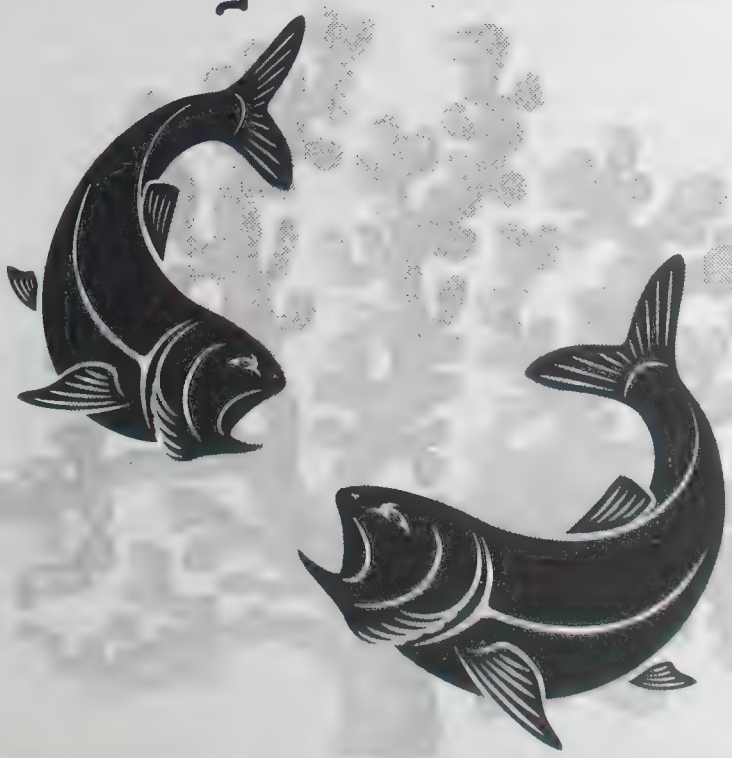
Everyone looked at him. She looked at him. "Perhaps," she croaked.

She hardly understood what had been missing, but as soon as the salty water touched her gills, she knew. She shivered—not in pleasure, not exactly. She shivered in comfort. In the return of familiar and preferred circumstances. All was now as it should be.

With a twist of her body, she kicked away from the cradle, out in the water. It was too warm and too light here at the surface. She couldn't recall how she had gotten here, but that gave her no anxiety. Even if she had remembered, the string of events would have meant nothing. Why should one thing come before the other? Why should effect follow cause? It was all merely a simultaneous jumble of sensations—strange sensations—sensations best forgotten.

She dove, seeking colder and darker waters, slipping into the depths. She was a safeguard. She must return to her home, for she had been placed there and she was a safeguard. Of the little she knew, that was all she was certain of. ❍

Late Nights Around the Fire Coral



Do fish tell
abduction stories, huddled
around in conference rooms
of run-down hotels
or in the calm eddies of

lesser-known riverbanks
recounting the horrific tales
of laying on dry rocks, being
probed in the gills,
and passing out?

And having nothing more
than their hazy dusk
memories,
do they wonder if maybe
five-fingered mammals

don't really exist?
—Brian Garrison

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson tells us "Rules of Engagement" is his second story on a military topic for *Asimov's* ("The Coldest War," February 2009, was the first). He says, "My actual military experience is limited to working on the Canadian Ministry of National Defence's Y2K preparedness project 'Op Abacus'—a far cry from the high-tech on display in the current tale. A collection of my short stories, *Irregular Verbs,* will be out from ChiZine Press in May. It will include 'The Coldest War' and most of my other *Asimov's* stories."

A Reporter at Large

It was not much of a fight, as bar fights go: not even enough to get Kevin Bishop, Tony Cervantes, and Tom Hollis thrown out of the bar in which they had spent the afternoon and evening of July ninth. The three soldiers had been drinking at The Swiss Bar and Grill, a bar popular with college students on weeknights, but largely taken over by military on weekends when their implants relax the usual restrictions on alcohol. Bishop, Cervantes, and Hollis had served together in the 23rd Infantry Division of the 2nd Infantry Brigade (more often referred to as the 23-IN), mostly in Somalia and Yemen, and two of them were still on active duty. Fire team Chinook had survived the worst that the war and al-Shabaab could throw at them, but before long two would be in prison and one would be dead.

The immediate cause of the fight was money. Bishop, who had ordered the last two rounds, had revealed that he was unable to pay his share of the night's tab. The entire 23-IN had been flush with back pay when they had come home from deployment in Yemen, bringing a welcome stream of money into the city's bars; it was not unusual during that period for John Pratt, the Swiss's owner, to make two or more bank runs per night, each time with a duffel bag full of money. (Soldiers in the 23-IN pay for almost everything in cash, due to a widely held belief that their implants track direct payments.) Two months later the money was beginning to run out, and for Bishop—who was no longer receiving combat pay and was also making regular payments to the city's *ghat* dealers—it already had.

There are two common reasons why soldiers, especially regular infantry, enlist in the army. One is self-improvement: though some join with an eye on pursuing a military career, many more do so for the neural implant that, after their tour, opens

doors to otherwise unattainable jobs. That was why Hollis had joined, and why he now had a job with the city that paid well enough for Bishop to expect him to pick up the tab. When Hollis stood up and dropped a twenty on the table, just enough to cover his share of the bill, Bishop punched him in the side of the head.

"Get away from me," Hollis said. Bishop leaned forward and started swinging wildly with both arms. Hollis held his forearms up to ward off Bishop's punches until the buzz in Bishop's head got loud enough to make him stop. Tony Cervantes took Bishop by the arm, led him back to his chair and poured him a beer from a neighboring table's pitcher.

"What do you want from me?" Hollis asked, shouting to be heard over the dance remix of Julee Cruz's "Hipper Than Me," that summer's inescapable hit, playing on the Swiss's speakers.

Bishop drank his beer in one long pull, until the buzz quieted enough for him to talk. "I want you to have my back for a fucking change," he said.

Bishop had joined the infantry for the other common reason, because he—and his parents—feared that it was either the army or jail. Though he had never had any major trouble with the law, when Bishop turned nineteen he was no nearer to finishing high school than he had been five years before, and his father had given him a choice: he could join the army or go on the street, but he could no longer live at home.

There is surprisingly little connection between the reason why a soldier joins the military and his performance there. Though Bishop found basic training difficult, once he had passed that and been fitted with his implant he thrived. There was an appealing simplicity to army life: if you followed orders and didn't make trouble, you were "squared away"; fail in any of those respects and you were a "shit bag"—the lowest of the low, and subject both to constant harassment from superiors and fellow soldiers and to buzz from your implant. Though he had occasional run-ins with superiors, when he was deployed in Yemen he found a way to make use of his natural rebelliousness as a "pit bull," someone willing to do things and take chances other soldiers wouldn't, and was promoted to Private First Class and recommended for an Army Achievement Medal. Now that he was back home, though, and unable to return to active duty until he had been declared medically fit, he was falling back into old habits: he would later say that it was only the fact that Cervantes, his team leader, was in the same situation that had kept him from getting into serious trouble.

If Bishop was fire team Chinook's "bad cop," Tony Cervantes was the good cop. He had not needed the army to provide either money or stability: his parents, Daniel and Anita, started an implant fund for him when he was in middle school. If he had wanted for anything, his father told me, it was focus. After his high-school football career failed to lead any further he had spent a year doing little but sleeping and playing video games before settling on the army.

"I was against it at first," Daniel Cervantes told me. He and Anita still live in the home where Tony was raised, in the solidly middle-class Albuquerque neighborhood of North Valley. "I served a tour in Iraq when I was his age, and I saw what it did to a lot of kids. But he told me that he needed something like this, something that would give him a purpose like football had, and once I saw what the idea of it did to him I changed my mind." Between enlistment and basic training Cervantes began to train on his own, lifting weights and hiking the Sandia mountains with a full backpack. His size and his attitude made him stand out during training and, once deployed, he was promoted to Sergeant and put in charge of a fire team that consisted of Kevin Bishop, Tom Hollis, and himself.

The incident that had left Bishop and Cervantes in medical limbo had taken place

more than a year before. The 23-IN's base, FOB Gambit, is in Ta'izz, or "Brooklyn"—soldiers have nicknamed all of Yemen's cities after New York boroughs, due to the mud-brick high-rises that make them look like a sand-castle version of Manhattan. Their main duty in Yemen is counterinsurgency: as part of the mission to root the al-Shabaab out of Yemen and Somalia and make the Gulf of Aden safe for shipping again, Cervantes' team conducted daily "block parties" in which they would cordon off an area and go door-to-door, taking a census of the population and comparing it to intelligence. Mostly these would follow a schedule, moving in a grid around the city to keep tabs on as much of the population as possible, but at other times the mission would be a follow-up on some fresh intelligence. On that day fire team Chinook was one of three fire teams dispatched in a Stryker personnel carrier to a neighborhood centered around the Abu Walad stadium, following a tip from one of the interpreters or "terps" who worked for the Division that a high-value Shabaab figure was hiding out in a house there. (Though implants provide near-simultaneous translation, the army still relies on interpreters to provide a friendlier face and to catch subtle cues, such as a speaker's tone of voice or body language, that might be missed by a non-native speaker.) Now the terp, a Somali man in a black-and-white *keffiyeh* and a borrowed ballistic vest, was whispering directions to the driver as the Stryker crawled along the narrow road. Though there was no other traffic the vehicle moved in fits and starts, stopping periodically when one of its slaved drones detected signs of an EFP. Bishop began bouncing in his seat.

"Keep your shit together," Cervantes told him.

Bishop tucked a wad of *ghat* between his teeth and lower lip and began working it around his mouth. "Sorry," he said. "I'm just buzzing."

I first met Kevin Bishop in the visiting room at Washington State Penitentiary, where he is currently serving a death sentence and awaiting execution. His trial received some attention in the media, but the local papers had covered it as a straightforward crime story: I only became interested when I learned, through a friend in the military, about Bishop's experiences in Yemen, and found out just how remarkable it was that he was in prison at all.

A decade ago, servicemen were not an unusual sight in the penitentiary. Since the introduction of the Hybrid Warrior implant program, though, violent crime by military personnel in Tacoma—as well as everywhere else that the 23-IN has been posted—has dropped to almost nothing. When I asked Bishop why he thought it had failed in his case, he explained that there were three ways around the negative reinforcement the implant uses to control behavior, which soldiers call "the buzz."

"The easiest way is to drown out the buzz with drugs, booze, or both at once," he told me. Though he says he no longer chews *ghat,* his gums and teeth are permanently stained green. His fingers twitch constantly, seeking out any object—a pen, my notebook, a cigarette—that they can use to beat out their rhythm. "That's why so many guys started chewing *ghat,* so if you have to violate the rules of engagement—like maybe shooting somebody you know is a Shabaab, but they haven't shot at you yet—you can ignore the buzz long enough to do it." The other method was to trick your implant: "If you can make yourself believe, I mean really believe, that the Shabaab had fired on you even though you hadn't heard it, or that a girl wasn't a whore even though you were paying her for sex, sometimes your implant will let it go." The problem with that method was that to trick the implant you had to trick yourself, and you might wind up married to a Ukrainian bar girl, as Tom Hollis had.

And then there was Dirty.

"Dirty" Dunn, known as Daniel to his mother if no one else, was a legend in the 23-IN as the man who had, supposedly, hacked the buzz. "Hacked" is something of a

misleading word, because he had done nothing to modify his implant's hardware or software. Dirty's method, instead, was to start the week leading up to a leave with a series of small but increasingly frequent violations of the Code of Conduct. "He'd stop polishing his boots, stop making his bed, even stop showering, just put up with the shit his CO gave him—and the buzz, which would get worse and worse," Bishop explained. "As soon as his leave started he'd go to a drinky bar and get pissed, do whatever drugs he could find, get in a fight, and have a whore do things to him 'til it hurt—and when he got that far he didn't just feel the buzz, it was as painful as hell. Then, when he'd broken every rule that he could without being put in the stockade, he'd go back to base, shower, make his bed, shine his shoes, and then he'd have the greatest orgasm of his life."

Kevin Bishop never tried Dirty's method, but he told me he had no doubt that it worked: like every soldier he knew how much of a relief it was after he had heard an AK-47 fire, or an EFG go off, when the implant allowed him to fire his weapon. Being in a situation where he was anticipating something like that—such as riding in a Stryker on the way to a block party—could bring on the buzz even if he wasn't doing anything wrong.

The mud-brick skyscrapers in a traditional Yemeni city are built without any space between them, making literal "blocks": as the Stryker neared its target the streets between became too narrow for driving, so it slowed and turned 90 degrees to bar the way in and out. While one of its drones turned in a tight circle overhead, watching for an ambush, the others set up a perimeter around the area that was to be searched that day.

"Bella Bella will stay by the Stryker and handle any PUCs," Staff-Sergeant Brenda Hamm said to Cervantes and the leaders of the other two fire teams. "Aleut takes the left side and Chinook the right." So long as the Stryker was rolling Hamm, the squad leader, was in command of all three fire teams: once they were on the ground Cervantes was expected to lead his team on his own unless he got direct orders from Hamm. "Have fun."

Cervantes saluted and then turned to Hollis and Bishop. "Bishop, keep your drone heeled and stay on me. Hollis, get your Raptor up—I want a map of that building before we set foot inside."

Hollis nodded and shut one eye, making mental room for the feed from his drones. Each fire team in 23-IN is made up of two regular infantry and one drone operator, who has an upgraded implant that lets him multitask between multiple drones as well as what they're doing on the ground. "Vehicle's clear," he said a few moments later.

"All right," Cervantes said. "Let's see what Brooklyn has to throw at us today."

Even after he had left Yemen, Bishop had little trouble maintaining his *ghat* habit. Both Tacoma, the nearest city to Fort Lewis, and Seattle, which is not much farther, have large Somali communities, and while *ghat* is technically illegal it is not a high priority for the DEA. After he and Cervantes were moved out of the 23-IN and reassigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion, Bishop began to chew *ghat* nearly all the time. "I was always buzzing," he told me. "Every day we'd get our tests and our scans and wait, just kill time all day, and every day it got worse."

The purpose of the Warrior Transition Battalion, or WTB, is to provide specialized medical care for soldiers well enough to be out of the hospital but not currently able to return to active duty, as well as education and training for those granted medical discharges. Some critics, however, say that the main focus of the battalion's staff is looking for reasons for soldiers to be "chaptered out," or discharged without benefits.

The more common name for the battalion within the army, the "shitbag brigade," suggests that little sympathy is felt for the soldiers there.

Bishop and Cervantes were constant companions during their time in the WTB, amusing themselves as best they could with ping-pong and video games at the base's rec center during the day and drinking at the Swiss in the evenings. In the first few weeks, when it seemed like they would soon be returning to active duty, their conversation was focused mostly on stories and events from their time in Yemen. Later, when that prospect became less likely, they would discuss what they would do when they were discharged. Bishop's plans grew more grandiose as the time passed, from joining the police force to robbing drug smugglers near the Canadian border. Finally, when even being chaptered out began to seem impossibly remote, Bishop became focused on finding more immediate sources of both action and income.

This, it emerged, was the real reason behind the fight at the Swiss. Hollis often joined Bishop and Cervantes there on Friday evenings, when his wife Bohdanna took English classes at the Tacoma Community House. Earlier that afternoon, Bishop had tried to enlist Hollis and Cervantes into a plan to rob John Pratt when he made the last bank run of the night. Neither of the others took him seriously, by now used to Bishop's grandiose plans, but on this night he refused to let it drop: finally Hollis had called for the bill—at which point Bishop revealed that he was out of money, and the fight began.

Later, once Hollis had gone and Bishop had recovered from the buzz, he said to Cervantes, "I guess we'll have to do it next Friday. We'll need to get someone else, too."

Cervantes shook his head. "Let it go," he said. "And why would we need three people, anyway? How heavy do you think a bag of money is?"

"No, listen," Bishop said, leaning in close. "It'll be just like when we'd PUC a Shabaab in Brooklyn." (PUC—"person under control"—is army slang for detaining a captive.) "First we rent a white van with plenty of room in the back. We need one guy with a quad to keep a tail on Pratt—all that money in a bag, he probably takes a different route each time, just like the top Shabaab guys. So when we know which way he's going, we get the van in front of him to make him stop, pull him in the back and bag him, keep him a few hours. When we let him go he'll be so glad to be alive he won't care about the money."

Cervantes brought his glass to his lips and took a long swallow. "That," he said, "is the stupidest plan I have ever heard. What if he calls 911? What if the van gets too banged up to drive when he hits it?"

"What if, what fucking if?" Bishop said. "When did you get to be such a bitch, *sir*?"

Ignoring him, Cervantes took another drink. "Here's how you do it," he said after a few moments. He tipped the napkin dispenser on its side on the table and put the salt and pepper shaker on either side of it. "Send the quad, like you said, but use it to figure out which bank he's going to. Keep the van the next street over, then once you know where he's going you get ahead of him, take out the ATM camera with a spraycan or something. Then we just wait for him to roll down the window to deposit the money and we get a gun on him."

"That's awesome," Bishop said. "Let's do it tonight!"

"I'm just *saying*," Cervantes said. He raised his glass and drained it.

The soldiers began to come out of the Stryker once the drones were done sweeping the street. The air was full of the yeasty smell of *canjeero*, the Somali flatbread that is a staple breakfast food in Yemen. "I'm going to watch out for a kitchen, okay?" Bishop asked Cervantes. "Somebody around here has to be cooking something."

The terp was the last to emerge, his keffiyeh pulled down almost over his eyes.

Life can be very dangerous for terps: some will only work wearing masks, to protect themselves and their families.

"You're sure Guleed is here?" Hamm asked.

"In one of the houses in this block, I hear," the terp said. "I don't know which one. Maybe the owner, even, doesn't know."

Hamm nodded. "Cervantes, take him up with you. We'll watch the road."

Cervantes led Bishop, Hollis, and the terp to the furthest doorway. "Hollis, find us something to shoot."

Bishop chewed his wad of *ghat,* spat green goo onto the doorframe as they went in. A map of the building, made during the last block party, appeared on his retinal display along with a list of the known occupants; his Earworm, reading his mood, was playing "Blood and Snow" by the Icelandic death metal band Galdramenn. He and Cervantes heeled their quadrotor drones, trying to maintain a 360-degree field of vision while Hollis kept his Raptor circling the block and sent his two quadrotors ahead, mapping the inside of the building.

If you ask people who have known Tom Hollis to name one thing that defined him, they will tell you this: he is a hunter. He grew up in a semirural part of Bradfordsville, Kentucky, where he and his father had hunted rabbits, wild turkeys, and deer at every opportunity. By the time he finished school, though, it was clear that the hard times that had hit the area since the Louisville Ford plant had closed were not going to go away any time soon, and Hollis enlisted in the army. He excelled in marksmanship and drone operation and, after a successful first tour and promotion to Specialist, was fitted with an upgraded implant and assigned as fire team Chinook's Raptor operator (the army does not use the term "pilot"). During block parties, his job was to map out the interior of a building with his quadrotors and compare what they found with the layout observed by the Raptor, as well as looking for anything that might seem suspicious, such as fresh plaster or recent infrared traces in empty rooms.

Because of the ease with which their mud brick walls can be taken down and rearranged, Yemeni houses are particularly challenging to search. Cervantes, Bishop, and Hollis cleared each floor of the building methodically, starting with the animal pen at the ground floor and moving up through the bedrooms, kitchen, and finally the *mafraj* on the top floor, where the man of the house would entertain guests in the evening.

"This room should be bigger," Hollis said once his quadrotors had cleared the room. He pointed at one of the walls. "Last time that wall was about three feet south."

Cervantes trained his quadrotor's infrared sensors on the wall, but no heat traces appeared. "What do you think?"

"Don't know," Hollis said. "I'm not getting any heat traces, but it's pretty hot already—might be body temp in there."

"You see anything from the outside?"

Hollis shook his head. "Roof's all covered with old car parts—mufflers and shit. Bounces the radar. Mud brick's easy to take down and put up, though. Could just be the neighbors wanted a bigger living room."

"Check out the wall from in here, then. Bishop, take a look around the room. Both of you, keep a quad watching your tail." Cervantes turned to the terp. "You, come with me."

More than a dozen people had clustered in the *mafraj* when they heard the soldiers entering: children, brothers, brothers-in-law, veiled women only distinguishable by the color of their *chadors*, and the head of the household, a man whom Cervantes' implant identified as Murad Sharar. Cervantes asked him to name all of the adult men and women there, so he could check them against the census from the

last block party, and to have the men present themselves to the drone camera for facial recognition and the women for voiceprints. In a normal block party anyone new to the household would be recorded or photographed, but today anyone who wasn't already in the census was to be zip-tied and held at the Stryker. As the terp spoke to Sharar, a translation scrolled down Cervantes' retinal display.

"We're looking for Mohammed Guleed," Cervantes said once the census had checked out. "We have money for anyone who helps us find him. He is a dangerous man."

"I don't know any *Guleed*," Sharar said, looking sideways at the terp.

"Hey, hey—talk to me," Cervantes said. "Have you heard the name?" He asked. "From a neighbor? On the street? We have money for anyone who helps us find him."

Bishop spoke quietly to Cervantes while the terp was translating. "Look at this," Bishop said, holding an AK-47 assault rifle. "Under the couch."

"Okay, get it out of here," Cervantes said.

"Get it out of here?" Bishop asked. "They were hiding a fucking gun from us." He spat another wad of green goo onto the white plaster wall.

Sharar was talking more quickly now, making the terp struggle to keep up. "He says the rifle is just for protection. There have been many robberies in this neighborhood."

"You know this is bullshit," Bishop said. "They've got a secret room here. Guleed's probably in there laughing at us."

Cervantes looked over at Hollis, who shrugged. He held a hand up to Bishop. "Just get it out of here. Take it downstairs, okay?"

"Yes *sir*." Bishop said. He took the AK-47 and headed for the stairway. "Is it all right if I get a goat grab? I saw some stuff cooking in the kitchen, it'll probably just burn if we leave it."

"Fine. Get me a falafel." Cervantes turned back to Sharar. "Now, I want you to tell me. If you help lead us to Guleed, there will be money, and we can protect you—"

There was a hollow bang as Hollis hit the wall with the butt of his rifle. Sharar put up his hands and began to talk quickly; suddenly all the women, brothers, and brothers-in-law in the room started talking as well, making it hard for Cervantes' implant to isolate and translate what he was saying. "Tell him to slow down," he told the terp. "Did he say Guleed?"

"He says he has heard Guleed is in another building in this block. He wants to know how much you will pay him to find out which one."

"Why didn't he say that before?" Cervantes asked. He paused as his implant's translator caught up with the conversation, text scrolling up on his retinal display. He let his hand drop to his rifle. "Hold up. My feed says *Is Guleed still there?*"

The terp shook his head. "It is mixed up. Too many voices."

Cervantes turned back to Sharar and pointed to the corner of the room. "Okay, everybody but this guy, get over there and shut up." He took a pull from his camelbak and then turned to the terp. "And you, I want you to think really carefully about exactly what—"

A burst of gunfire came from downstairs, one Cervantes and Hollis—and, more importantly, their implants—recognized as coming from an AK-47. An indicator on their retinal displays changed from red to green, and the triggers on their SR-11 rifles unlocked. According to the rules of engagement, anyone in the area was now considered hostile.

Cervantes and Bishop went back to the Swiss on the Saturday after the fight, but they did not go inside: instead they sat in the back of a white van parked up the street, waiting for John Pratt to do his last bank run. They spent the evening playing

shooter games on their retinal displays, drinking cans of beer, and chewing *ghat*, aiming for the point where they'd be able to pull a gun on Pratt despite the buzz. Bishop was surprised, though, at how little resistance he had felt so far. "The fact is," he later told me, "when we did that op was the first time since coming home that I *didn't* feel the buzz."

Shortly before 1:30 A.M. Pratt came out the back door of the Swiss, wearing a heavy coat over a ballistic vest and carrying a locked suitcase full of the night's receipts. Once Pratt had driven out of the parking lot, Bishop launched the Kestrel Hi-Fli quadrotor they had bought the day before. Unlike the drones they had used in the army, which can fly mostly independently of their operators—military drones only transmit their feed, and implants only accept transmission, during algorithmically determined microsecond windows, to prevent either from being compromised—FAA regulations require civilian drones to be under constant operator control, so Bishop had to close one eye to focus on the video feed it was sending him. The guns they were carrying were Shouqiang T-5s, a model that doesn't have the implant-linked trigger locks their service weapons had. Both Cervantes and Bishop, though, assumed that their implants alone would prevent them from firing. (When I asked Roy Healy, Bishop's court-appointed lawyer, why this point had not been raised at his trial, he said he hadn't thought it would make a difference: if anything, he said, his ability to overcome the implant might be taken as an aggravating factor.)

Cervantes waited a few minutes, until Pratt's car was out of sight, and then started the van moving. Bishop told him that Pratt was headed down Pacific Avenue, then called up a map that showed all of the ATMs in the area.

"Where's he going?" Cervantes asked.

"I don't know yet," Bishop said. "Either to Sound Credit Union or Umpqua Bank."

Cervantes turned onto Market Street and sped up. "Well?"

Bishop watched Pratt turn onto Commerce Street. "Sound Credit."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Bishop looked down at the Kestrel's feed on his tablet, then back to Cervantes. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Cervantes sped up, rushing toward a yellow light on Seventeenth Street. It turned red when he was a car-length away from the stop line; he rushed through the intersection without slowing, his eyes closed. After a few seconds he opened them again and glanced at the feed on Bishop's tablet. "Are we ahead?"

"Yeah, we've got about two blocks on him. Take the next left."

Cervantes slowed just enough to make the turn and after another block the ATM came into view. It was a drive-through machine set back from the street, with a plexiglas canopy spanning the driveway to shelter it from the rain. A heavily weather-beaten brown Toyota Allegra was idling next to the ATM.

"Fuck," Cervantes said. He slowed the van and moved it into the driveway behind the other car. "How much time do we have?"

Bishop looked down at the drone feed and then over his shoulder. "Couple of minutes—he hit another red light."

Cervantes worked his wad of *ghat* around in his mouth, rolled down his window and spat it out onto the sidewalk. "This is it," he said.

"We could do it next Saturday," Bishop said, but Cervantes was already out the door. Bishop saw him draw his pistol as he neared the other car, keeping it low and just hidden behind his right hip, and then swing it in a smooth arc so that it was inside the Allegra's passenger-side window before the people in that car could do anything. He heard shouting from inside the car, and Cervantes shouting, and then saw on the drone feed that Pratt's car was crossing Fifteenth Street, a block away. He reached over to the steering wheel, his hand hovering over the horn; before he could

honk it the Allegra sped away, bumping over the sidewalk and then peeling away down the road. Cervantes tracked the departing car with his pistol until it was out of sight and then froze, his arm pointed the way it had gone.

Bishop saw the back end of the van come into view in the Kestrel's feed and realized that Pratt's car was nearly there. He blew a sharp honk on the horn: Cervantes dropped his arm to his side and ran back to the van's driver-side door. Pratt, apparently unnerved by the other car's sudden move, drove on instead of pulling into the ATM's driveway.

After Pratt's car had gone by Cervantes got back into the van. Bishop kept his eyes on his tablet, guiding the Kestrel to rest on the roof, then got out and stowed it in the back. Before he could close the rear door the van was moving, and he had to crabwalk to the front and squeeze between the seats to sit down.

"That guy," Cervantes said. He was staring out the windshield, his foot heavy on the accelerator as they sped down Pacific Avenue.

Bishop shook his head. "I know. If he hadn't been there—"

"No, *that guy*," Cervantes said. "That was the terp. That guy was the terp who set us up."

Though there was no outward sign that Cervantes and Hollis could now fire their weapons, everyone in the room knew it. Bishop has described that moment, when the rules of engagement allow them to defend themselves, as a feeling of release: "You can breathe again, like you just took off a belt that's too small for you," he told me. "The locals can see it, too, 'cause now you feel like you're Superman. That's when you know if they really are Shabaab or not, 'cause if they are, this is when they shit themselves."

Hollis backed into the corner nearest the door, bringing his rifle up to cover both the people in the room and anyone who might come in; at the same time his quadrotors buzzed through the lower floors, trying to find the source of the AK-47 fire, and he put the Raptor into a tight spiral over the building's roof. Cervantes took a step back and pointed his rifle at both Sharar and the terp, waving them over to the corner where the others were huddled. Both men raised their hands and started talking quickly, one in English and the other in Arabic. Cervantes ignored the garbled translation feed running down his retinal display and sent a message to Bishop: WHERE ARE YOU?

I'M IN THE KITCHEN, the reply came a few moments later. WHAT'S GOING ON?

HOPING YOU COULD TELL ME, Cervantes sent. SHOTS DIDN'T COME FROM UP HERE.

"Movement on the roof," Hollis said. "Trap door—missed it, sorry."

Cervantes shook his head. "Don't sweat it. You got a visual?"

"Six Shabaab—man, they were packed like sardines in there."

"Guleed?"

"I'm just seeing the backs of their heads right now. They're climbing onto the roof and running for the next building."

"Ping the other teams with our status, then send one of your quads up there to get me an identification. For now, paint them all—" Cervantes' voice caught as he was hit by the buzz from his implant. Guleed was a high-value target, which meant that he was to be captured alive unless he was certain to escape or about to harm military personnel. "Paint them green for now."

"Got it."

A message from staff-sergeant Hamm popped up on Cervantes' display: DETAIN HOSTILES UNTIL FURTHER ORDERS. FIRE TEAMS ALEUT AND BELLA BELLA WILL PURSUE TARGET. Cervantes began to compose a reply, then wiped it. "Keep an eye on them," he said to Hollis, then sent a message to Bishop: MEET ME AT THE FRONT DOOR. He sent his quadrotor out the window and started down the stairs.

The buzz was deafening by the time he reached Bishop. He held out a hand: "Give me some."

Bishop frowned as he followed Cervantes out onto the street. Cervantes rarely chewed *ghat,* and never on missions. "Sir?"

"Fucking give me some."

Keeping a one-handed grip on his rifle, Bishop reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a baggie full of glossy, red-brown leaves. He opened it, releasing a pungent smell like mint mixed with sumac, then held it out to Cervantes, who took out a large handful of the leaves and put them in his mouth. Cervantes' cheeks bulged as he broke into a run, dodging the garbage being thrown from windows above while trying to catch up with the green dots going from rooftop to rooftop on his GPS map.

A message from Hollis flashed on Cervantes' display: GOT A VISUAL. GULEED CONFIRMED. All but one of the dots changed from green to red, and a moment later two winked out as the muffled roar of the Raptor's 8-ball missiles filled the air.

Bishop laughed. "Looks like Hollis got another couple heads for his wall."

A visual from his quadrotor showed that Guleed and the other remaining Shabaab had reached the edge of the roof they were on, past which the next roof was more than ten feet away.

"Think he'll try to jump?" Bishop asked.

Cervantes spat thick green liquid onto the ground, his mouth too full of leaves to talk. GET YOUR QUAD IN FRONT OF HIM, he sent. WE'LL BOX HIM IN. He took direct control of his quadrotor and made it hover a few feet behind Guleed and the others, broadcasting in Arabic, Somali, and then English: "THIS IS THE UNITED STATES ARMY. YOU ARE BEING DETAINED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN. LAY DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED."

Through the now-constant feed Cervantes saw a green-tinted Guleed turn back to see Bishop's quadrotor rising up in front of him. The whine of the Raptor's engine showed that it was turning and targeting the three flashing-red Shabaab around him. They held up their hands and clustered around Guleed, obscuring him: Cervantes could just see him reaching into the pocket of his shalwar kameez and take out something shiny.

CELL PHONE? Bishop sent. Cervantes moved his quadrotor to get a better look and began composing a warning for it to broadcast. Guleed keyed the phone with his thumb, three quick jabs. The feed from the quadrotors went dark, and a moment later the world went dark as well.

"How could it be the same guy?" Bishop asked. "What would he be doing here?"

"Good question," Cervantes said. He was quiet as he drove north on Pacific Avenue, looking for the Toyota that had sped away. "I think I lost him."

Bishop chewed his wad of *ghat* for a minute, then rolled down the window and spat onto the street. "You sure it was the same guy?"

"I saw his eyes." Ahead of them a traffic light had turned red, and with a sigh Cervantes slowed the car as he approached it.

"Okay, so it was the guy. So what? Half of Seattle's Somali now, and it makes sense he'd get out—they bring the terps over here after their tour so the Shabaab won't kill them for helping us."

"He *is* a Shabaab." Cervantes was looking straight ahead, his eyes locked on the traffic light. "He lied to me. He knew what was happening and he helped Guleed get away. So what is he doing here?"

Bishop said nothing.

The light changed and Cervantes accelerated quickly. "Do you think you could find him with the quad?"

"Now? We'd have to stop to launch it, and we don't even know where he went."

Cervantes lifted his foot from the gas pedal, letting the car slow down before the merge with Schuster Parkway. He turned right on Eighth and pulled over. "The Shabaab's never touched us on American soil. Hitting a target here is their wet dream."

Bishop opened his mouth and then closed it another moment, unable to find the words for what he wanted to say. "So you want to PUC him?" he asked finally.

"He's not here alone," Cervantes said. "We need to track him—find out where he's going, who he's talking to."

"But—" Bishop winced and rubbed his eyes. "We can't do that with a quad we bought at Radio Shack."

Cervantes shrugged. "So we get Hollis to help."

The Pentagon has not yet declassified whatever information it has on the device that disabled Cervantes, Bishop, and their quadrotors, but that has not stopped people from speculating. Much of that speculation has focused on the fact that it wasn't used until Bishop and Cervantes had assumed direct control of their drones, though it is also true that Guleed was essentially cornered as well. Hollis' Raptor was not affected, but it's not known whether it recorded any unusual electromagnetic activity at the time. While al-Shabaab has been surprisingly successful at downing drones, their methods, such as using kites to tangle a quad's rotors, have always been low-tech. The most popular theory is that the device was provided, willingly or unwillingly, by Iran, which has a robust and long-running anti-drone program. Army personnel other than Raptor operators are now forbidden from taking direct control of their drones while in the field, and perhaps because of this no similar incidents have been reported.

Cervantes and Bishop awoke several hours later, apparently unharmed, and after being held for observation and implant servicing at the army hospital in Sana'a they were given "three hots and a cot"—a one-day leave outside of the combat zone—and then returned to active duty. Though he had disobeyed orders by chasing after Guleed, Cervantes did not receive any reprimand. Staff-Sergeant Hamm, who is still serving with the 23-IN in Yemen, declined to speak with me, sending this message instead: "Whatever they did, it had nothing to do with what happened in Ta'izz. All three soldiers went on to serve with distinction for the rest of their tours, and none of them showed any signs of anything being wrong." When I asked if the failure to catch Guleed, and Cervantes' belief that the interpreter had betrayed them, might have had an effect on him later, Hamm wrote back "We caught Guleed two blocks away. So far as I know Tony put all that behind him."

Tom Hollis agreed to meet with Bishop and Cervantes at the Sonic Drive-in two blocks from the two-bedroom bungalow he shared with his wife Bohdanna in Tacoma's quiet North End neighborhood. He had stopped going to the Swiss since the fight with Bishop, and did not want either of the men coming to his home.

Before they had even sat down, Cervantes began telling Hollis who he thought he had seen in the brown Allegra—though he left out why he and Bishop had been at the Sound Credit ATM that night. Hollis listened silently, sucking his milkshake through a straw and occasionally turning his gaze from Cervantes to Bishop and back again, until Cervantes had finished his story.

Hollis put down his milkshake. "You're sure it's him?"

"Yeah," Cervantes said. "We don't have anything on him yet, not even a name. But

you've got red light cameras, drones flying all over town—all I have to do is give you his face and his license plate and we can figure out who he is and what he's up to."

Hollis raised his milkshake and took another sip. He turned to Bishop. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Yeah," Bishop said. He had not wanted to come to the meeting, worried that Hollis would bear a grudge over their fight, and had kept his attention focused on his chili cheese fries, tapping his feet as Heaven Sent's "Shalimar" played on the restaurant's speakers. "I mean, yeah. I agree."

"So you saw him?"

"Yeah. No. I mean, Tony did, but he *saw* him."

Hollis was silent for a moment, then frowned. "It ain't that I don't believe you, but what you're talking about could get me fired, or even arrested maybe," he said. "I got a mortgage to pay, and if anything happens to me Bohdanna's got nothing."

"Are you kidding me?" Bishop asked. He pointed a fry at Cervantes, his hand trembling. "This guy is—he is not asking you, he is giving you an order."

Hollis stood up, his posture stiffening. He turned back to Cervantes. "Is this an order, sir?" he asked.

Bishop smiled. "Hell yes it is."

"I'm asking him."

The speakers played the first bars of "Hipper Than Me" as Cervantes sat silently. Finally he shook his head. "We really could use you," he said.

"Call the cops," Hollis said as he turned to leave. "Or the FBI, whoever. Tell them what you know and keep out of it."

"Yeah, go. Get out of here," Bishop called after him. "Go back to your Russian whore."

Hollis froze in his tracks, then craned his head around to look at Bishop. He closed one eye partway, as though he were looking down a gunsight. "She's Ukrainian," he said, then stepped out the door.

Bishop saw one of the restaurant's employees walking over to their table and stood up, waving her away. "Don't bother," he said. "We're going."

By the time the 23-IN was rotated back to Fort Lewis all three soldiers had been given commendations for actions before and after the incident, with Hollis also earning Sharpshooter badges in both the Rifle and Raptor categories. There is no record of any of them being offered or seeking out counseling during that period, and they received no special attention or screening during the Post-Deployment Health Assessment meant to identify potential problems that might occur when soldiers return to civilian life. Hollis received an honorable discharge and, thanks to his implant and an army employment program, quickly found a job with the city of Seattle, using drones to predict and shape traffic patterns. Cervantes and Bishop decided to accept the three-week vacation offered and then go back to active duty. After the three weeks were up, though, the two soldiers were transferred to the Warrior Transition Brigade, and the 23-IN went back to Yemen without them.

The assignment to the WTB came as a surprise to Cervantes and Bishop, since neither had received any serious injuries and had been serving in the field up to the end of their tour. As well, it raised the possibility that they would be either discharged or chaptered out, neither of which were attractive options for the two. Though he has no doubt that whatever had happened to their drones was the reason he and Cervantes were assigned there, Bishop says they were never asked any questions about it and did not receive any specialized treatment, only a daily MRI and system scan.

I got no answer when I asked the medical records department at the Battalion to

let me see copies of Bishop and Cervantes' scans. Major William Jameson, who has been the chief technical officer for the army's Hybrid Warrior program since its inception, contacted me a week after I sent my second request, and invited me to meet with him at his office at Fort Lewis. Jameson, a tall, affable New Englander whose John Lennon-style granny glasses make an impression at odds with his crew cut and uniform, supervised the 23-IN's deployment in Yemen. When I asked him about the case, Major Jameson said that he had been aware of it but had not handled it personally. "If they were in the WTB it was for a medical reason," he told me. "I can tell you that there was nothing wrong with those implants. If there had been, we wouldn't have let those soldiers off the base."

When I told him what Bishop had said, about the buzz going away when he was planning and carrying out the robbery plan, Jameson sighed. "There's a reason why we forbid soldiers from using drugs, and it's not just the law. The implant is designed to influence the brain on a very subtle level, chemically and electrically, and drugs can interfere with that." *Ghat* and other drugs, he told me, are the reason why the soldiers' later behavior and actions are so much at odds with how they performed on deployment: "Drugs won't affect the implant, but over time they can affect the brain in ways that are past the implant's ability to correct."

He also denies that the implant's reinforcement systems can be hacked to give pleasure the way Bishop described. "It's just like the old joke about hitting yourself with a hammer," he told me. "It feels so good when it stops."

Six days later, Bishop got a message from Cervantes: FOUND HIM. TACOMA MALL FOOD COURT.

Without access to Hollis' drones, Bishop and Cervantes had been forced to look for the terp on foot. Cervantes used an app called SketchArtist to make a picture of the man he had seen in the Allegra, and he and Bishop had spent the week on a search-and-detain mission around the parts of Tacoma and Seattle with the largest Somali populations.

Bishop, who had been searching the Hilltop neighborhood a few miles northeast of Tacoma Mall, drove as quickly as he could without speeding, conscious both of the gun and of a large freezer bag of *ghat* that he had in the car. He took a leaf from the bag and began to chew it as he locked the car and went into the mall. The food court was full of Korean and Somali teenagers, as it usually is on Friday evenings, snacking on short ribs and *sambusas*. The smell of *canjeero* coming from the Casho Cambuulo stall summoned memories of Yemen as Bishop scanned the court for Cervantes' face.

Another message from Cervantes arrived, containing a map of the mall with a location pin on one of the bathrooms. Bishop broke into a run, keeping his right hand on the pistol in his jacket pocket to keep it from falling out, and turned off the mall's main corridor to an open area with an information panel, two benches, and a small play structure. The sign on the bathroom door was a stick-figure picture of a man and woman with a child between them, holding their hands, and inside the small empty room was a Koala Kare diaper station along with two stalls and a sink. Bishop turned sideways and stood edge-on to the door, so he wouldn't be in the way when he needed to open it. Through the thick door he could just hear Cervantes' voice over the mall noise.

Bishop pulled the handle and the door swung inward. A frightened-looking Somali man was on the other side, trying to get away from Cervantes. Bishop grabbed the man's wrist and pulled him inside; Cervantes followed, closed the door behind him and leaned back against it.

Kahin Jama, a twenty-four-year-old Somali man, was a recently settled refugee

from Yemen. When he found himself trapped between Bishop and Cervantes he pulled out his wallet and dropped it on the floor. "Please don't hurt me," he said.

Bishop took off Jama's belt and drew it tight around Jama's wrists, like a zip-tie. Then he drew his gun from his jacket pocket and trained it on Jama.

"Why are you here?" Cervantes asked.

"Don't hurt me," Jama said to Bishop.

Cervantes brought a fist down between Jama's shoulders, knocking him to his knees. "Talk to *me,*" he said. "I bet you thought we'd never find you, huh?"

"Please," Jama said, sobbing. He held his hands up on either side of his eyes, like a horse's blinders. "I didn't see your face. Let me go, I won't tell anyone, I promise."

Bishop sidled over to a sink and spat green goo into it. "Do you think . . ." he asked.

"He fooled us once," Cervantes said. He took a step forward, drew his gun from his cargo pants and pressed the barrel to the back of Jama's head. "What are you doing here? WHERE IS GULEED?"

The door behind Cervantes pushed inward, knocking him briefly off balance. Jama threw himself at the now-open doorway, trying to get to his feet, and Bishop shot him in the back. Jama fell forward and landed at the feet of Emily Park, a thirty-two-year-old mother who was bringing her two-year-old son Levi to the washroom for a diaper change.

Bishop later said that he did not notice either Park or her son screaming. Instead, as he looked down at the gun in his hand, his only thought was *How did I do that?* A moment later he fired again, obeying his conditioning to do a "double tap"—two shots into a target's chest or back.

Jama's body kept the door from closing fully and they could see a crowd of people outside. Cervantes turned to face the crowd, and Bishop moved to stand beside him. Both held their guns in front of them, and the screaming got louder. Many of the people in the mall that day were refugees, and for them the sight of Bishop and Cervantes was not only frightening but triggered painful memories as well. Those nearest to the soldiers froze or fell to the floor, while some further away ran for safety.

Cervantes and Bishop turned partway away from each other, dividing the mall corridor into two arcs of fire. When soldiers in a counterinsurgency campaign are surrounded by hostile forces, they are trained to execute what soldiers call a "death

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blossom"—a constant barrage of fire in all directions until the enemy is killed or forced to retreat. Bishop and Cervantes had participated in three of these while serving in Yemen, two of them while assigned to Abyan province following the incident that downed their drones.

"Looks like we're boxed in," Cervantes said. "I don't think we're getting any backup."

Bishop nodded and began to scan the crowd, picking targets. Emily Park's cell phone began to ring, playing a tinny version of "Hipper Than Me," and suddenly, Bishop says, he was aware of where he was, tasting the *ghat* in his mouth and hearing the screams of the terrified mall customers.

He turned to Cervantes. "Tony. Hey, Tony," he said.

"What is it?"

"This is—this isn't right," Bishop said. His jaw was working furiously and he had to spit out *ghat* juice before he could keep talking. "These people, they aren't Shabaab, man. You need to put down the gun."

Cervantes shook his head. "They're lying," he said.

Levi Park began to cry, a single, rising note. Cervantes aimed his gun at him and Bishop fired, two quick shots into Cervantes' back.

"The crazy thing is," Bishop told me later, "all that stuff, everything we did, I never felt like anything was wrong. The only time I felt the buzz was when I shot Tony."

Daniel Perez, a professor of neurocybernetics at the Medical College of Georgia, first heard about the case when I contacted him after meeting Bishop. Though he was too late to give testimony in Bishop's defense, he has met with Bishop several times since then. "The reason the army hasn't found anything may be because it's not just something the implant is doing, but an interaction between the implant and the brain," Perez told me. He has studied the effects of cognitive implants since they were first introduced, and he describes them as an interaction of two chaotic systems. "In order to work with a human brain, the implants have to be able to rewrite their programming, even while they're running. But our brains do this too, and the studies we've done don't shed much light on how they might interact in highly stressful, emotionally charged situations."

Though the army denies that the soldiers' implants had anything to do with their crimes, Perez has joined the effort to apply for a stay of execution for Bishop, and has also called for a freeze on military implants until more long-term studies can be done. He told me about experiments he's done in which similar implants were used to help teach rats how to get food from a machine, and the rats were then made to switch to another method. "Even when they learned the new way to get the cheese, the implant punished them for it," he said. "And when we switched back they got a huge dopamine rush." He feels that Bishop's lawyers should have raised the possibility that the implants, alone or in conjunction with other factors, predisposed the soldiers to violence in a way they might not have been before.

I asked Perez how he could square this with Major Jameson's claim that the implants were undamaged, as well as the fact that other soldiers from the 23-IN had not been involved in any similar incidents. "Their implants weren't damaged, just reset," Perez said. "It's a learning device: whatever it takes as normal, it reinforces. What happened to Bishop and Cervantes may have just happened *sooner*."

On the morning of November third, two months after I met with Perez, Tom Hollis arrived at the Seattle Municipal Tower trailed by two Cormorant drones, carrying a Swiss Arms K91 rifle over his shoulder. Witnesses say he looked like he was going hunting. ❍

THE TALKING CURE

K. J. Zimring

Kim Zimring recently moved from Georgia to Seattle. Her poignant story about an old man's memories of a perilous childhood, however, was written in New Mexico, at Walter Jon Williams's "indisputably fine Rio Hondo workshop." Kim is a graduate of Clarion 2005 and her previous stories have appeared in *Asimov's, Analog,* and the Writers of the Future anthology.

My first memory is of my dead mother. I'm crouched by her face, mouth close enough to kiss, waiting for a breath that never comes. An open jar of mushrooms sits beside her, spoon embedded in its boggy heart. Botulism is the cause of death, I presume, though why I selected that for the image I couldn't say. Some warning about home-canned goods wrapped together in my childish brain with the classic Oedipal love/fear complex: Mother, bringing food and death.

It isn't true, of course. That's always my next thought. Mother died at a hundred-something, better preserved than anything canned in Nazi-owned Vienna. She was never warm to me, certainly, but to translate that to the literal coldness of the grave? It's an image only a Freudian could love.

My wife Lillie scooted a little closer to me on the sofa. She'd been the one who'd spotted the ad in the back of the AARP rag. Art authentication—who'd have thought there'd be money in it for a guy like me?

Given who I'd known when I was a kid, apparently there was a bundle. She'd found that out when she called. Sotheby's got the details and sent a representative right over, to drink tea and perch on our armchair, and offer up a stack of signable forms.

"So this memory projection thing," I say to the rep, after I signed an attestation this, an informed consent that, and settled on the day after tomorrow to come down to their office. "You can tell the difference between real memories and fake ones, right?"

He nodded, fingers flicking through the papers. "Of course." He looked up. "We wouldn't be able to use the memory evidence for authentication purposes if we couldn't."

"Provenance," cuts in my wife Lillie, reading it off the brochure's front page. "That's what you're interested in?"

"Yes, exactly." He stopped, assessed our faces. "Do you know much about the art world?"

"No," I said, though I knew it would annoy Lillie—she hates to look uncultured. Still, I needed to understand this. The auction house had been a little coy on the phone as to what exactly they were looking for.

"Provenance is proving a painting is real, isn't that right? Not a forgery. That's what you're interested in." Lillie folded her hands in her lap. I was impressed. Maybe all those senior trips to museums had paid off.

The rep tilted his head a little, back and forth. "Well, technically *authentication* is the process of proving a painting is by a given artist. Provenance is only one part of the authentication."

"How about looking at the signature? Can't you just do that?" I was feeling ornery, I admit it. Then again, I was the one due to have the contents of his brain projected on the wall. Wasn't I owed a little leeway?

He smiled, conciliatory. "The signature—the attribution—is part of the authentication. Along with brushwork, style, choice of paints—all these things are considered." He leaned forward. "Provenance, though, is needed for a painting to be accepted as an official oeuvre."

"Luck, you mean?" I ask just to be difficult. "God's will? By the hand of provenance?"

"That's prov*idence*," he said, no annoyance visible at all. Professional. I appreciated that. "This is prove*nance*. It means who owned the picture. An unbroken provenance is best: the artist sold the painting to this person, who hung it in their house for so many years, and then it was sold to this other person—"

"Whose house are you interested in? What ownership?" my wife asked, but I already knew. There was only one person my mother had known who was famous. Only one they would be interested in.

"Freud," I said. "You want to know if I saw a particular painting on Freud's wall."

The rep smiled. "That," he said, "is exactly right."

We visited Peter right after that. Rolling hills, green lawns, soft-voiced aides; the Salday Home for Advanced Autism offered a pretty sweet deal from what I could see. I wouldn't talk either, if it meant losing my spot here.

I hadn't chosen this place, of course. Peter is my sister Elsie's son. Ten years younger than me and Elsie kicks the bucket first. I'm the guardian now. A parent, at my age.

We strolled down the pathway, Peter dawdling behind to look at god knew what. Had to be a couple of thousand dollars worth of tulips alone out here, I judged. Heck, who wouldn't be serene, surrounded by this much pricy vegetation?

"Looks like all that money from my memories is going to find a nice home if we keep paying for this place," I said. "Bet it'll be happy. Lots of other greenbacks to play with."

"I think it's nice here," Lillie said. That was as close to arguing as Lillie would ever come.

She doesn't understand autism, though. Not like I do.

I *was* autistic. Seen by Hans Asperger in his little clinic school in Vienna. Worse than Peter, even: I couldn't talk at all.

But I learned how. It took a damn bad scare to force the words out of me, I knew. Coddling didn't work and never would. They don't understand that here.

That's okay. My guardianship, my money, my decision where Peter goes. I'll find a place that can give him that kick in the pants he really needs.

"Think about Freud," the tech said as he flicked on the projector.

The Sotheby's office was all low light and nice reproductions up front. Back here the rooms turned clinical: stainless steel shelving, the tang of disinfectant, dentist-type chairs.

Fine with me. Anything involving my brain ought to be as lint-free as possible, I figured.

The room they deposited us in had a Monet theme. Water-flowers, bridges, sunsets, that kind of thing. Could have been worse. We'd passed a Frida Kahlo room two doors back. Who could concentrate with those eyebrows looming over you?

The tech got me in the chair and gooed my head up, for good conduction. Then he stuck a couple hundred electrodes all over my head. Not painful, just a little itchy, and of course you weren't allowed to scratch.

"Okay," the tech said. "Lean back and get comfortable. You can close your eyes and remember or you can watch what's on the screen. Whatever makes you most comfortable."

Freud. Beard, glasses, suits, think. I frowned.

"Don't try to force it. Just relax."

Memories flickered in and out. The screen flashed, image after image, jumbled as a rummage sale. A bike. A desk. That first apartment in New York.

"What if he can't remember Freud's house? He was so young. Could those memories be gone?" Lillie's voice almost had that old lady waver, worried.

"It's all in there. Try to pull up some sensory details. Where were you living? What did it look like, feel like, smell like? Start there."

A tiny panic seized me. I was already counting on the money for Peter. Still, I'd been so young then. What if I couldn't remember anything?

Vienna coffee, Vienna sausages, Vienna Nazis. Everything was overlain with my American self, American associations.

Gluh-wein. I remembered the smell of that: cinnamon and cloves and steaming heat. Forbidden for little kids, of course, and Mother never drank it either. Still, the town squares were full of the scent of it all winter.

Finally, the picture settled. I watched as a small yard came into focus, looking down from above. A blond kid—me—lay on his back on the grass, sleeping in the shadow of a tree.

Lillie cooed. "You're so cute. And so much hair!"

"That's not you on the grass," the tech said. "It's a memory. We're seeing through your eyes. You must be in the tree."

Lillie looked at me. She knows when I disagree even if I keep my mouth completely shut. "I've seen pictures. It looks just like him."

The tech shrugged. "Did you have a brother? Or cousin? Or someone. Memories are just like seeing—you see what's around you, not yourself."

I didn't bother to argue. The guy was just a tech—what would he know about autism? I was like that before they put me to the test. I always saw myself from the outside. I remember that, clear as day.

"Where are you?"

"Home. That's our house in Vienna."

"That's okay, just keep going. Get settled into this, get your brain working on the right time period."

While we watched, my mother banged out of the house. So young, hair still brown, face unlined. Half the age I am right now, that's what she was then. Another woman not much different in appearance charged out after her, screaming something in German.

"What are they saying?"

I shook my head, listening, letting the feel of the language flow over me. The woman kept yelling, something about a child. About wanting my mother to take her child. About how they'd taken his father away and the kid was next and my mother had to help her.

I would have crumbled in the face of need like that. It wasn't going to work on my mother, though. I knew that before I even watched my mom shake her head no, no, no. Woman had a heart of stone.

Decades ago, all of this, but still I felt sorry for the other lady. The poor woman's face was blotched, her nose swollen, her whole face sore-looking, like she'd cried and cleaned up and cried and cleaned up so many times that she might as well have scrubbed her face with salt.

"What's she saying?" Lillie stared back and forth between the screen and me.

My mother started talking now. She pointed to me, still lying under the tree, mouth open as if I expected a plum to fall in it.

I listened a little more. "She says that boy—me—is going to be killed too, unless I start talking. She's saying the other woman's son might have a Jewish dad but at least he's normal."

Lillie's mouth opened. I held up my hand to stop her. I wanted to hear a little more. Who knew all of this was in me? All those people, long dead, and here they were, jabbering away in my head like they were still alive.

"Is that true?" Lillie had reached out a hand and grabbed mine. "They would have killed you?"

"The memory's true, sure." The tech pointed to the edge of the picture on the screen. "See the black border? That means it's true. False memories don't have that."

Lillie tipped her head. "A border?"

"Well, that's just how the program encodes it. It's a marker for where the memory is stored—true memories have an occipital lobe component, among other things. Different neurochemicals as well."

"Where it's stored. What wall of the brain it's hanging on, where the little memory pictures have been all this time, you mean?" I couldn't help but laugh. "Sounds like provenance to me."

"I guess." The tech gave a waiter's smile. Humor the old guy: might as well have had that written on his forehead. "Anyway, you've done great for a first session. Didn't really expect to get to Freud today."

Just as well, I figured. It'd give me time to brush up on my German before the next time. I could have sworn my mother called the woman her sister. Couldn't be right, though. I don't have an aunt.

The Fieldfind Institute. Okay—it was bleak. I admitted that to myself but at least they wouldn't waste my money on frou-frou bulbs and flowers. Serious—that's all it was. Not evil.

"That's not the most horrible place I've ever seen." Lillie took my hand as we walked back to the car.

I knew what that meant—talk about other people living in your brain. After fifty-two years, we probably owned a lobe's worth of each other's brain cells. "You hated it."

She raised one elegant shoulder. "I wouldn't put *you* in there."

That was the point, I didn't say. I didn't need to be there. I didn't need to be shocked into talking.

Been there, done that.

It didn't bother me how she felt today. I'd prove I was right, show her exactly how it happened, projected straight out of the past and onto the small screen.

Peter needed to be challenged. Knocked out of his silence and no apology needed for the one who did the knocking.

He'd thank me himself. I knew it.

New room at Sotheby's this time—Jackson Pollock splatters on the walls—but the chair and the goo and the electrodes were the same. Same tech too.

This time I slipped right into it. Closed my eyes and I was there, four years old, my hand in my mother's. We were walking up to what looked like a manor house, all tan stone and impressive windows. A clock-tower stood in the courtyard, just begging to be climbed on, but she tugged me past it without a word.

"What's this place?" the tech asked.

"Hospital." I felt sure of that. In my mind, it smelled like disinfectant.

The tech clicked his computer, skimmed through the reference pics that popped up

on his screen. "You're right. Steinhof Hospital. The children's part—Spielgrund." He clicked a little more, enthusiasm deflating. "Don't see that Freud worked there."

On the memory screen, other children were being brought in. Spastics and idiots, me included, that's what the Nazis must have seen when they looked at us. No one to play with is all I seemed to see.

A bunch of corridors and then we went into a place labeled the Psychiatric-Neurologic clinic. I sat next to my mother on a bench, looking scared. She'd told me all about how important it was I talk a lot to the doctor. I remember that.

That was all that happened for a long time, except for other kids getting called into other rooms. The tech fidgeted worse than any of the kids while this all played out. That gave me a kick.

Finally, on the screen, they called me in. The doctor was a woman—Dr. Turk—and she chatted with my mother before sending her back outside to wait.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, even though I knew it was necessary, knew it's why I have the life I do today.

"I've read about this," Lillie said. "If they decided you were autistic, mentally challenged, a mute, they would send you off to be gassed."

The examination proceeded on the screen. Shirt off, pants off, listen to my heart, everything in silence except for orders—breathe in, breathe out, lean forward, lean back—from the doctor.

Finally, the doctor stopped and told me to get dressed again. I did. She said I'd done very well and was healthy enough to go to camp at Hartheim Castle. She said there'd be lots of other children there and sunshine and fine activities and asked if I'd like to go.

"No," I said on the screen. The words pound inside my head even now. "I don't. I want to go home with Mother."

The doctor reared back at that and we had a long conversation about this and that, stupid childish things but triumph surged through me all the while.

That's me, talking for the first time, I thought. My mother must have told that story a hundred times. I practically had it memorized but it was nice to see it on the screen. True, too—it had that nice black border.

Then the doctor and I went out and she talked to my mother about Asperger's clinic school, which I attended. I don't remember him at all to be honest, which is a pity because he's gotten so famous I can't help wondering if he had any important pictures in his place. My mother said yes, Asperger was a miracle worker, look at what he did for her boy. I was speaking so well, had grown out of that old quiet phase, was a lovely normal son now.

On the way out, my hand back in my mother's, we passed a line of buses with their windows blacked out. I knew what those were for and even now it gave me a sick little jolt to see them.

But I didn't have to get on them. I could go home and have a life. I talked because I *had* to.

They showed me pictures of Freud's place in Vienna, to jog my memory and get me moving in the right direction. Berggasse 19 was the address. I couldn't help snorting when I saw the big curved entryway at his place—talk about phallic images.

It came back to me though after that. A few minutes later the memory screen showed what the tech enthusiastically agreed was the inside of Freud's apartment, on the second floor.

The tech tried to zoom in on the wall pictures. I looked at the woman. It wasn't my mother. It was the other woman, the one my mother argued with in the yard.

The thing was, this other woman kept calling me her son. She asked Freud to take me—her son—with him to London.

He can't, he's sorry. The English had papers for him but not for anyone else. He admired her husband, he's very sorry they took him away, dangerous time to be politically active, but he wouldn't worry too much. He's sure the Nazis won't kill her son—me?—just because his father was Jewish.

All that time, the tech was panning around the memory room. A mirror here, a photo there, but nothing that looked like a painting by Hitler, apparently.

My heart raced, though. The woman's face—it reminded me of my mother's face in that old false death memory.

Hard to tell for sure. Dead faces look different from living ones.

On the screen, the woman who called herself my mother talked about her sister. Said she fled here to Vienna to hide with her sister. Said her sister's child was afflicted and mute and they were going to kill him too. Said she has a plan.

A plan and a can, basically. Something about how everyone warned you about eating badly canned food. She knew just what a bad jar looked like. Knew it could kill you in an instant.

She also said if she were dead, her sister would have to take me. Hoped there'd be *transference*, just like Freud himself always talked about. Her sister would love me like a son in the end.

All this time Freud took notes. Probably thought it was hysteric nonsense. Probably wondered where the penises came in.

"The right picture's not there," the tech said finally.

I begged to disagree. My heart was seizing up, but I could see the whole picture now.

We were back in the Vienna house, inside this time.

"You have to be quiet." The woman I always thought was my mother was in the bedroom talking to the boy who wasn't me. We look very alike but it wasn't me.

That was my aunt, I thought. Not my mother. My mother was the one with Freud. The one with the plan to save her son. It went well, I guess. At least, she made her sister take me.

I was in the front room. It was spare and clean and somewhat empty.

"There's a nurse coming," my aunt said from the bedroom. "You have to be very, very quiet and stay where I put you."

I got up to see what was going on. I peered around the corner. The boy who wasn't me was sitting on the bed. She must have let him out of the closet—that occurred to me, remembering this—and he'd finally stopped screaming. He was sitting on the bed. On the bedside table there was a jar of mushrooms. My aunt forked one out and gave it to the boy.

After a while, she covered him with a blanket, face and all. She sat back down and stared for a while and then she saw me and stood up. She came over and took me back to the front room.

"What else could I do?" She said this after we'd been sitting on the sofa for a while. Her face was white and stark and her eyes looked terrible.

She talked to me for a while. I was eating bread, stuffing my face with it, not listening. Her words still made it into my brain, obviously. All these years later and I can hear it now.

"I couldn't hide him," she said. "How can you hide a boy like that? He screams and screams if I leave him alone. He couldn't stand to be anywhere small and dark, wouldn't understand that was the only way to keep him safe."

She was justifying herself to a four-year-old. On screen, long ago and far away, I kicked my feet.

"I only have papers for one boy. I'll clean things up here after the nurse visits and then we'll go to Munich. We'll be safe with Karl's relatives. This is the way it had to

be." She went on like that, outlining a plan to a kid. A good plan. It worked, after all.

"Nothing else?" The tech's disappointment was palpable. No shock or horror though—I don't think he caught what happened.

On the memory screen, there was a knock on the door. My not-mother—my aunt, admit it—stopped talking to me, opened the door, invited the nurse in. The nurse gave me a toy. I babbled on about it, thrilled.

To child me, she was a nice new friend. To adult me, well—I'm glad it wasn't my cousin who had to face her. She would have sat there just as sweet-faced, watching his silence, and then gone back and written his death warrant.

The tech drummed his fingers. "We haven't got much more time. Maybe Freud's consulting rooms? Can you think about that?"

I tried. I remembered a room with a couch, a Freud-like couch. It stood by a big fireplace and looked like a great place to take a nap.

That image flashed onto the screen. Black-bordered: true.

"That's it," said the tech. Excitement warmed him up. "That's Freud's consulting room."

My aunt—the woman I was going to grow up thinking was my mother—stood talking to a girl. Freud had already left for England, apparently, was what the girl said.

"There it is!"

The tech focused in on the back wall. A small, crappy watercolor hung there: a church, some trees, some mountains. The perspective was off but the signature was right. A. Hitler, in black script, bottom left.

You'd have to be nice to buy a painting like that, I thought. You'd have to feel bad for the artist, want to make sure he got some money and had something to eat that night.

Anyway, the tech was happy. We found it. Everything was proven, authenticated.

In the buzz after the authentication, I asked the tech to let me throw up one more memory.

The one about my mother, dead, from the tainted mushrooms.

Black-bordered. True. Of course.

It wasn't me. It was never me.

The woman I grew up with, who kept me safe with her husband's relatives in Munich? The one I called mother?

That was my aunt. A small shift, genetically. A big one, mentally. There aren't any psychiatric complexes named after aunts, for a reason.

It's easier to love her now. She killed her kid for me. Not that he wouldn't have been killed anyway, sooner or later. But. It takes a certain clear-eyed coldness to get that done.

Preserved by the refrigerator mother. I like that.

Lillie thought that part of it was nonsense. Said who wouldn't be cold after being forced into an act like that?

Anyway, Lillie's happy with me. For one thing, I had to say I was wrong, and to a wife of fifty-plus years, that's as good as a diamond. I didn't start to talk to save my life. I'd always talked just fine. I just wasn't who I thought I was.

So, therefore, Peter's staying where he is. At the nice place, the coddling place, the quiet place.

They gave us printouts of the memory pictures. The next time we visited, we took him one of his grandmother, my aunt. A serene-looking one, from when she's sitting next to me on the bench in the clinic, looking contemplative.

He seemed to like it. He took it and put it on his board. He didn't say anything, though.

And that's okay. ❍

Joe M. McDermott is the author of five novels and two short story collections, including *Last Dragon, Never Knew Another, Women and Monsters,* and *Maze.* His first story for *Asimov's* takes a look at the complex persona of . . .

DOLORES, BIG AND STRONG

Joe M. McDermott

My earliest memory was waking up with my arm aching from the new shunt, and a cat was at the foot of my bed giving birth to kittens. I sat up and watched the cat. Dolores, my step-grandmother, had more cats than anyone could count, plus a small herd of goats. We lived with her as long as I could remember, but I know we didn't go out there until after my mom shot my dad and he went to prison. I don't remember that. I remember waking up and Dolores' cat was having kittens at the foot of my bed. It was a grey tabby cat, nameless and lean when it wasn't pregnant, and I watched the cat, mesmerized, while the kittens emerged from it. The mother cat licked their faces clean, and even swallowed much of the afterbirth. I was too young to be horrified by it, because I didn't really know what was happening. It was this scary, bloody thing happening, but it was slow and calm and the cat was purring.

It made a mess of the bed, and my mother told this story more than I did because after a cat gave birth on my bed, my mom was able to convince her step-mom to keep the cats outside from then on, because it couldn't be good for me to have cats giving birth in the bed.

I think the other reason I remember this before anything else is because this was when I had just come back from the hospital where the shunt was cut into my arm for the steady transfusions. I had the shunt replaced a few times when I was growing up, but once I got about fourteen I stopped growing, and I still have the shunt under my factory coverall.

Dolores was a dairy farmer before she got too old for hard work and retired. She still kept miniature goats. My mom's mom had married my step-grandma after my real grandfather was arrested and put on death row. My mom's mom had brought my mom out here, once, from the city, to live on a farm, and at first people thought it wasn't that she was really a lesbian, even though she always was, but that her man had left her sour. Her man had kept her from being who she really was, is all, by force. Then, when my real grandma died my step-grandma raised my mom, alone. Then, after I was born and my dad was shot and arrested, my mom and I moved back out here, away from the city and the city lights. I don't remember any of that stuff, because it was all before the cat gave birth at the foot of my bed, and I was scratching at the bandages from the shunt that had just been installed, but there's plenty of pictures around.

I think my mother assumed that Petey was my boyfriend because we have a family history of very bad, very violent, or very stupid men. She had assumed that I had

inherited the attraction to them, and never considered I had inherited their side of things, instead.

I tend to simmer quietly, then unexpectedly burst into a furious flood. Out here, where I'm staying in a factory dorm near Rockaway Beach, the other girls of the line give me room because I broke a chair over the head of a foreman at a different factory, and I had also stabbed a man with a pen on the subway, once, when he was bothering me. I had had enough. There was no warning. I was fine, calm, and quiet. Then came the flood.

The most trouble I ever got into, growing up, was this one winter I had had enough and I opened the gate and got all the goats to run out of the gate and I was so glad to see them gone. I went inside and got cookies and milk and thought I had gotten away with murder. Our neighbor had seen it, and called my mother's cell phone. She left work early, raced home, and beat me red with a leather belt like Dad used to, and then I still had to go out there with her and with Dolores, and I had welts coming up in my skin in the cold. The goats were on the roof of an old, abandoned office building near the highway. My mom had to get a ladder and get up there and try to get them down without falling through. The neighbors were helping. Everyone was yelling at me. The goats were scared and skittish and they didn't want to go anywhere. An icy, freezing rain came down like little razor blades, and Dolores was whistling and hollering and waving carrots in the air trying to get the terrified goats back into the yard.

I was beat again inside, and then I had to lay down with my step-grandma and open my shunt for her and it hurt to sit down, I was bruised so bad.

Dolores was sweaty and shaking. She had her own shunt open, and was having trouble breathing and keeping her hand steady. It took her a few tries to get the tubes attached and flowing between us. Then, my arm ached from the blood pouring out of me, into her; out of her, into me. She took some of her medicine and caught her breath. She was too tired to yell at me. I watched TV while my mother was out calming the goats down, checking them for damage. Parkinson's was a disease of the blood, not the brain. She needed better blood. I gave it to her.

Dolores never beat me like my mom or my dad. So, that was something. She brought me out on the porch, later that week, and asked me to help her with the milking for a while. I spit and said I didn't want to. She didn't make me. She didn't have the strength to make me do anything. She asked me if I was all right.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Because that was a mean thing you did," she said.

"So?"

"If you want to hurt me, you come after me. You want to hurt your mom, go after her. But you don't take out your hurt on the animals. They don't know better than what they are. They didn't do a thing to deserve you nearly killing 'em like that, setting 'em loose in winter with all the dogs and wolves hungry and the cars on ice slicks. You want to hurt me, girl? Is that what you want? Well, you hurt me head-on, and you leave my animals alone. No more of this passive aggressive shit. Got it?"

I sneered and said nothing. I went inside, poured a glass of milk. I refused to feel guilty. She was shouting at me, "*Got it? I said, 'Do you got it, girl?*'"

I called her Dolores, or Ms. Dolores, or Ma'am. I never called her grandma. I think she would have liked to be called grandma, but Mom didn't call her Mom, so I didn't. Even with the shunt in my arm, that's what I called her, she was always Dolores to me—*Ms. Dolores, Ma'am*.

When I was younger, before I set them all loose, I helped her with the goats. They were stubborn things, just smart enough to get in real trouble but not smart enough to get out of it. I learned how to milk them by soothing them and stroking their sides and cooing at them, and then hooking them up to the machine pump. They had to

give birth to make milk, and the baby goats were sold off every spring. I hated the goats. They were everywhere. They ate the laundry on the line. They stank and shit everywhere. I woke up and I smelled them. I went to school smelling like them. I came home and the smell hit me at the gate and snuck into my dreams. Dolores stank. Dolores smelled like a barn and a cat lady and stale marijuana smoke.

I close my eyes, now, and I can make out her shadow in the dark, silhouetted against the security lights at the edge of the fence. Dolores was out there, sipping tea in the security lights, with goats nestled into her legs, and cats everywhere. She stroked all their backs, cat and goat as if she was the lion with all her lambs in the night. She had names for all of them, but I never cared to learn any of their names. I called them all *Cat* and *Goat* and refused to touch them if I didn't need to. They congregated on the porch, where they got fed from big bags she kept in the pantry. Dolores sat on a rocking chair and watched the sunset, smoking the weed Petey brought her from the illegal dispensary. She had one of the kittens from my bed in her lap and hummed to it. She never fixed her animals. She gave away kittens, and let them run away into the woods. She sold goats all year to keep the milk going.

Dolores was a big woman. I mean, she had a back like a steel beam. She had a big, thick neck like a man's. She kept her hair short. She really looked like a lesbian's lesbian. I have this picture of my grandmother and Dolores on the day they got married, and my petite, thin grandmother, with her big smile and Asian eyes is grabbing on to this white woman that looks like a bear in a tuxedo. Mom's standing next to them both, confused but happy, no older than I was when I woke up with a shunt in my arm.

I tell the girls in the plant up here on Rockaway, when they ask about it, that I will never, ever live on a farm again, in my life. I won't even touch goat to eat it. Too many of them dream about it—some land, some animals, and a garden big enough to feed their whole world. Not me. I like the factories better. They don't smell.

I still have the shunt in my arm, but I keep it hidden. It's two inches on each side, square, and medical plastic. It opens up like a tiny cupboard. Inside, part of my arm-muscles are pushed around to make room for a tube that unspools. Beneath the plastic, it attaches to a vein. There's an in and an out that open when it unrolls. The inner lining of the shunt is clear plastic, so we can keep an eye out for problems underneath—failed veins, infection. The tubes and veins get replaced every few months, and when I'm showering, I open up the shunt and rinse it out with antibiotic soap.

My mom said we were so lucky I was the same blood type as Dolores. Our house's resident giant was rotting out from the inside, where her blood wasn't strong enough to hold her mind steady and clear out the plaque against Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and I had to open my arm and feed her my blood. Not even a universal donor could do it. It had to be a perfect match. We weren't related by blood, just marriage, but I matched. I matched. My Mom was a B. Her mom was a B. Dolores was a rare type called Duffy, and so was I. It was an African-origin mutation not discovered until the late twentieth century. We both probably had the same African great-great-great-grandmother in that little upstate town, but you wouldn't know it to look at us with me Hispanic and Asian and Indian and anything else that came along that was brown, and her as Caucasian-looking as anyone of such old New York bloodlines. The blood type we had was going to make transfusions difficult, and like my mother said, wasn't Dolores so lucky I could shunt my arm for her to keep her Parkinson's back, and the Alzheimer's from kicking in. Honestly, even if Mom had matched, it wouldn't have worked. The younger the blood, the better. So the shunt. Every night, when I watched TV, I was plugged into that tree trunk woman, my step-grandmother. The blood passed between us, and it kept her hands from shaking and her mind from going, going, gone.

My blood wasn't the only medicine Dolores took. There were vitamins, pills, and prescription-strength weed. My mom filled prescriptions at the store in town when she was running errands, but the pharmacy weed was expensive and taxed up to make it more expensive. We had a kid pick it up for us from a speakeasy dispensary, illegal and under the table but we were safe about it because we never went out looking for it, and no cop came hunting us down on our own land over weed. The boy who got it for us, Petey, was a skinny thing, riding out from town in his mom's pickup truck. Everyone thought I had a crush on him, or that we were an item, and we never were. He'd come in the front like he owned the place, throw his backpack on the table with the week's weed in it and make a cup of coffee. Pastorius was his Christian name. People only ever called him Petey.

He was years older than me. He was a high school drop-out. One of his odd jobs was scoring the weed for Dolores and a few others that couldn't afford the pharmacy rate. He bought it at the speakeasies, and drove it out to our goat farm, among his other deliveries.

(He brought speakeasy Ritalin, too, which my mom used to stay awake at work. I used one once, and it scared me so much I never touched it again. How strange and calm I felt—no sea inside, no dreams—my poor mother. She worked mostly nights, at a phone bank. She couldn't focus. She talked in her sleep all the time, in Hindi or Chinese, sleeping all day if she wasn't at work early or picking up an extra shift. (The time I let the goats out, she had been picking up an extra shift and Dolores was off at the store, or something, or making milk deliveries, and I was home alone, for once, and I took advantage of it.)

Petey called me Jujube because everyone called me Junebug or Jujube and not a one of what people called me was my Christian name: June Jimenez Nguyen. He asked me how old I was, and if I was old enough.

"Old enough for what?" I said.

He shrugged. "You'd know what I meant if you were," he said. It wasn't something sexual he was asking me. It was something else. It was like a slow joke, a bad joke, that got repeated until it became mythic between us. He sat at Dolores' kitchen table, waiting for her to come in and pay for the week's worth of weed he had shoved into the back of the freezer. He sipped cold coffee with goat's milk and honey. He ate bacon, if we had any sitting cold on the stove from breakfast.

"Do you ever think she's giving you the bad blood?" he said, while staring at the shunt.

I shrugged. "I make good blood enough for us both."

He frowned and popped some bacon in his mouth. "I don't know," he said. "I wouldn't let anyone do it to me."

He wouldn't leave until Dolores came up to the house and paid him and he'd gotten something to eat. Big Dolores, moving slow, hands unsteady, because she still had Parkinson's, and no amount of blood transfusion could slow that down forever.

Dolores stuffed some of the weed into a pipe and wandered out to the porch to sit with her cats. The goats had accumulated near the back porch where one of them had butted a compost bin over. They were rooting through the rotting eggshells and leaves and no one was stopping them. Big Dolores didn't have the strength to stop them, this late in the day. She called out to me. She asked me if I could chase him away from the mess. I pretended like I didn't hear her. I was not a good kid.

Petey grabbed his keys from his pocket and held them up like he was asking me to come with him. He was waiting for an answer.

I thought about it, and about how my mom would beat me black if I left right then. I shook my head. Still, I stood up and almost went with him. For a moment, I was going with him. I broke eye contact, though, and thought better of it. I went out back

and cleaned up the mess. I kicked at the goats and howled at them, but they thought it was a game and they were eating the gross, fly-riddled garbage and kept at it. It took a while to rake it up, and get the compost upright, and get it chained back down and how on earth did they figure out that chain? Dolores was watching me, smoking, humming to her cats, and saying nothing.

Afterward, we went inside, and got our shunts open, and I got a little stoned from her blood in me.

Mom got up for night shift work and saw that I was glazed over, and I think she said something to Dolores about smoking before shunting, but Dolores just clutched at her head and said she had such pains. "Such pains, little girl. Oh, my lord the pain inside of me. I'll need to go to the doctor this week and get a new prescription."

"Be careful, Dolores," said Mom. "Our little Junebug's got school in the morning. She's got to get blood drawn by and by, too, for school things. They got to pass a drug test to do extra-curricular activities. What if she wants to do a sport? She ain't got a prescription for anything like that." I never wanted to do a sport. I never wanted to do anything.

"Oh my lord, the pain in this head of mine," said Dolores. "Only thing that slows it down a pinch is the devil's weed. Sorry, girls. Can't be helped sometimes."

She was big, but she wasn't as strong as she used to be. I remember when she could pick up two young goats under one arm to haul them back to the barn. They weren't the biggest goats, but they were big enough. I remember her fixing a fence by herself, slamming the posthole digger down and yanking it out, flannel and overalls flailing around, her sunburned face all beading with sweat.

Petey took me for a ride into the city. Mom thought it would be a good idea for me to get out of the house, as long as Petey promised to keep his hands to himself. That's not how she said it. "You know Dolores has a pistol as big as your arm, and a shotgun, too, and you know I know how to shoot like ringing a bell," is what she said. "I had to shoot her daddy, once, right before he got arrested. Damn near killed him, too. He still can't walk."

Petey said "Yes'm," and nodded, and offered me a stick of gum, right in front of my mom. "Here," he said. "It's so we can have good breath for the make-out session we're going to do all night."

She was going for the gun, and we ran, laughing. We ran into his truck and took off. Thinking about that, and how he was going to be dead in about a year, makes my mom's joke a little ominous, but she didn't kill him. He was in a car accident, and died in the hospital.

Anyway, we went out to walk around Main Street. He said he was broke, so it was up to me to get the ice cream from my allowance. We sat on the curb and watched people driving up and down Main Street. Petey and I were laughing about how stupid his real name was, and how crazy Big Dolores was, with her shaking hands, and how she couldn't even keep up with her own goats. I told him my earliest memory, and how it was Big Dolores that made me see such a thing when I was too young for it, right on my own bed. She had all those damn cats. She didn't know what to do with them, and she wouldn't fix any of them. Hell, half the cats in town probably wandered off our farm, got picked up and adopted somewhere. He let me talk and talk. He asked if I ever wanted to get off that farm, out of this town.

"Of course I do," I said. "I hate it here."

"We could go," he said. "I mean, just as friends. I got to get on a path to success before I can have a girlfriend. I heard that from a life coach my mom showed me on the Internet."

"What the hell kind of thing to say is that?" I said.

"Because I'm a dropout and I'm not going anywhere, and I don't want anyone getting stuck on me when I know exactly what I am, what I'm good for."

"Whoever said I liked you anyway?" I said. "I don't even like you. I just wanted out of the damn house." I think I was probably lying to him, and I think he could tell.

"That's a good thing, Jujube. Go find yourself a better man. I can't even buy your damn ice cream. We're pals. That's all."

"There's no one else around much, though," I said. "Not in this two-street little hole. I ain't a lesbian like Big Dolores. I need a man. We should both go and see if we can't find something better."

"See, you do need to get out more, girl. You need to get out and not be stuck in one place or with one person. You're, what . . . fourteen? Fifteen?"

"Sixteen," I said. I was lying, of course. I was fourteen.

"Well, I'm eighteen, and I'm a drop-out. Kids that didn't drop out like I did, they joined the army or went off to college or something. I'll be lucky to get a factory job in Rockaway when I get there."

"You're going to the city?"

"Where the hell else? I ain't staying here to be a prescription mule until I'm arrested. I'll be lucky to get on a factory line with sleeping quarters. One of the real sweat shops that work a man to death. I stay out of the company store, keep my head clean, don't drink anything but water . . . maybe I can save up enough to get out. I drink too much, though. I need to stop drinking the whiskey before I get there."

His dreams, for what they were, rolled off me like a cloud. I heard only that he wanted to go away, and that he wanted to take me with him and that he thought I was too young to go with him, that maybe he was thinking about Dolores' gun.

"You know my mom doesn't actually know how to shoot that damn hand cannon," I said. "She would have shot my dad dead bang if she could shoot for shit."

"Well, hell," he said. He had this sad look on his face. "I'm not much in this world, but I won't do that. I won't do that, Jujube. You're still a kid, and I'm not, and I know better than to think your mom ain't right to shoot a man for it. You're cute, though. I think you're cute as kittens. Come on, Jujube, and let's go see if we can't get you home before dark. Ain't you gotta earn your keep with Big Dolores?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "She can wait, you know. She's not my real grandma. I'm sick of it. It's so boring and there's that thing in my arm. Nobody ever asked me what I wanted."

"What do you want, Junebug?"

"I don't know."

"Well you let me know you figure it out. I'm the guy that brings things to people. I can find just about anything."

"What if I wanted something awful?"

He shrugged. "I do have limits," he said.

At home, my momma was sitting up with Big Dolores. They were both on the back porch, passing a joint between them. "Gotta watch it, girl," she said. "You've been here long enough to know the way goats get made, but you're too young, and that boy's no good. Like your daddy, and your granddaddy. He's no good."

Dolores snorted. "Hell, we ain't much good, either," she said. "Let her have her fun. We can take care of another baby around here and run him off, too, if he makes a stink about it. Why not?"

"She's my daughter, that's why not," said my mom. "You don't know what it's like to be with the wrong person, Dolores. You never had to learn that."

Dolores stood up slow. "Like she's going to listen to you anyhow . . ." She was heading inside. Cats were trying to follow her. She bent over slow to pet them and push them back from the door.

"There are boys who are going places, and boys who are stuck where they are," she said.

"We're just friends. He's a grown man, and I'm just a kid, and he knows it, too. He said as much. Ain't you supposed to be working tonight?" I asked.

"I called in sick."

"You ain't sick," I said.

She shrugged. "I won't tell my boss if you don't."

Petey liked me, though. He liked me enough that he wasn't going to take advantage of my age. That, I knew. Later that week, when I was lying down on the couch with Big Dolores, watching the box with my arm open and the blood flowing between us, I wondered if Petey would still like me if he saw this. Here I was, my arm really naked, bones and arteries showing, shunted open, blood pouring in and out between me and Big Dolores, and that cat stink all over her, and goat shit stink, and weed and farm stink. God, she stank. I stank just being here, around this place. God, we always stank. She had only seven or eight teeth left. She had dentures that didn't fit right. She pulled out her dentures and put them in a jar beside the couch while we watched the box. She closed her eyes and napped.

"You're probably already too old to do a damn thing for me," she said. "Still, it feels nice. Goddamn, but aging is an awful thing. It is terrible to be so old, Junebug. I hope you never have to know what it's like to feel like this. I hope you never need anyone like this."

She rubbed around the shunt in her own arm, around her own shunt, and around her elbows and all the way up to her shoulder.

I had show and tell once where I talked about it. I opened it up and showed the class. This is where the blood goes in. The blood always goes in at blue. Indigo blue. In is for Indigo. Blood always goes out at red. Red for bleeding. I pointed it out. I said that my step-grandma was sick, and her blood couldn't keep her healthy, so every night I ate a big meal, and I opened my arm, and let the blood flow out of me and into her, and she sent her blood into me and back, and my body was young and strong and I could fill it up with all the things she needed to keep her Parkinson's and Alzheimer's back. There are two plugs involved. One is in and one is out. We have the same blood type, so I can donate to her. It only works if you have the same blood type. Even universal donors don't work right like this. Plus, we were Duffy type, which is an obscure kind from Africa that's even harder to match than the A's and B's and O's.

The kids in the class didn't laugh or joke or anything. They were too busy looking into my arm, right where they could see bone through the hard, clear plastic.

The one time I showed it to Petey, he threw up a little in his mouth, had to run to the bathroom and rinse his mouth out.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought you wanted to see."

"I was eating. You let her do that to you? You let her open you up like that?"

"I know, right? No one ever asked me about it," I said. I touched it. "I wish I could just rip it off and walk away. Will you take me with you to Rockaway? I can find something there. I'm sure I can."

"What would happen to Dolores if you stopped?"

I shrugged. "I'm getting too old for it, anyway. She needs a new kid around with Duffy blood. I think she wants me to get pregnant so maybe she can get a new donor."

"I wouldn't let anyone do that to me," said Petey.

"I hate it," I said. "I hate it so much. I wish she would just die. Then I could get my arm fixed. Then I wouldn't need the goddamn shunt anymore. I wish I had a normal arm."

"Ain't you old enough to say you don't want to do it anymore?"

"And hear her moaning and my mother . . . God, my mother."

We were at the kitchen table. He had come to make his delivery. He said he had to drive over three towns to get it on account of the cops busting down the illegal dispensary behind the Taco Jimmy Stand. He asked me if I had ever been way up north to Drummondville. I had gone there, only once, to take a standardized test for college prep, with my mom. We left long before dawn. By the time I was done, it had been snowing so hard we got stuck in the building overnight. I told him that, and all I could remember was coming home the next morning, exhausted and starving, and there was Big Dolores, sitting on the porch with her cats, scratching at her arm with her hands shaking and cold all over, pale white cold, like an ice statue on the porch, melted a little then frozen melted, and missing me and the blood that kept her tremors at bay.

"Want to go?" he said. "Want to see where I get this stuff?"

I shook my head. "I'm staying in tonight. Chores."

Not chores. Never chores. I don't do the dishes. I don't take out the trash. Mom does that. Sometimes I make dinner, but it's just heating up the frozen stuff in the freezer, so it's not really cooking. What did I do around there? When I was very young, I helped with the goats in the morning until I got so sick of it and let them all loose in the winter and from then on Big Dolores told me just to go inside because I was going to spook the animals. Then, sometimes I'd help load up her car with the milk she was taking out to deliver. I met the vet at the gate when it came time for birthing, and I led the people who came for baby goats around back, to see the animals bounding around the fenced-off places. I cleaned bathrooms when I made a mess in them. I cleaned my room when I was told I had to clean my room. I didn't really do much.

Chores, I had said, because he had thrown up a little when I showed him my arm.

He knew what I was telling him.

When the snow came, that year, I was almost fifteen and it came all at once, like a flood. One day it was nice and the leaves had fallen and we were walking around the schoolyard with windbreakers. The next day, it was three feet and slushy and the wind howling so hard it never let up.

Petey came up to drop off the weed. He asked me if I'd mind if he used the restroom. I didn't know why he was asking me anything. He got up and went back into the hallway. Big Dolores came in and asked if Petey was here and needed cash. I pointed at the hallway. "He had to pee," I said.

She sank into a chair and put her head down. "I'm feeling old today, girl. Feel so goddamn old. What the hell happened to me? Winter comes and kicks me in the ass as soon as I'm thinking maybe this summer means I ain't so bad off. You know what, Jujube, can you go get my purse. It's in the bedroom. Gotta pay that boy or his momma will yell at me something fierce."

I went back in the hall, and back to her bedroom. He was in there. I saw him reaching into Dolores' purse. He saw me seeing him. I shook my head. He pulled out cash, far more than he was owed, and held it out to me. I reached out and took it from him. I slipped it into my pocket. He did the same with his. He put the purse back, his hands shaking and his face pale. I gestured for him to go to a window and climb out. Instead, he leaned over and got close to me like he was going to kiss me or something. I could smell him. He didn't smell any better than Dolores, honestly. I curled my lip and pulled away. If he hadn't have been stealing, I'd have kissed him. I turned my head in disgust.

Rebuked, he dove out the window. I hid the money under a loose floorboard in my room, and I think it might still be there. I've never gone back for it, honestly. What sins we've done, and how foolishly? It was only a couple hundred, and it's no use to anyone, now, under a floorboard in an empty house.

Big Dolores had started cooking kidney beans and eggs for dinner. She said she was going to need a long sit down tonight, because of the weather, and I should eat up. I told her that Petey had to go, on account of delivering all the way from Drummondville, and he could get paid next time. He had to make another delivery. Dolores shrugged.

I ate. I ate and I ate and I ate. Then, we sat down and bought a movie to watch on the box. It was a treat for me. It was the only time I was allowed to watch the TV.

I didn't watch the movie. I watched her leaning back, absently stroking a pillow like it was some kind of cat, closing her eyes and resting. I saw the grey bones of her face sagging. I saw the way the tension in her hard muscles had pushed so hard against herself she had collapsed inward into a heap.

"Petey stole money from your purse," I said.

"How much?" she said, without opening her eyes or acting surprised.

"All of it." I said.

"I'm going to call the police on him, if that's true."

"It's true. I saw him do it."

"Well, when we finish up, I'll call it in."

I sat there, watching her breathe heavy.

"Want me to call his mom?"

"Nope," she said. "Boy ain't your age, girl. He's old enough to stand for his sins."

"Maybe if we just called his mom, she'd talk to him. Maybe if we called him and told him we knew . . ."

"Girl, you know your momma wishes she had called the cops a lot sooner with your dad. Don't let these boys fool you. They do something like that, they know better, and you don't negotiate it with them, or they'll just think they can walk all over you next time and get off clean."

"Where will you get your fix if he don't bring it?"

That got her eyes open. She looked at me. "Give me some credit for competence, Jujube. I can still drive. I can still drive myself. I'm not that useless, yet. Thank god for that."

When we got done, I unplugged us both. Dolores got up and took a long, slow breath. She walked back slowly to check her purse, and found more than just money missing. He had taken her old wedding ring, too, from the jewelry box. She called the cops. She told them that her granddaughter had seen the boy that did it, saw him red-handed when he did it, and that they probably knew the boy pretty good already. They did. Petey had been in juvenile before. Petey had been in trouble with police before. Petey was known to be on a path with walls at the end of it where all his pathways stopped.

Dolores answered the door when the cops came. They said Petey confessed to everything. They said they didn't need our statements, exactly, but we might as well give them. They were able to recover the ring, but the cash was gone already. I looked over at Big Dolores, standing at the door. I went back to my room. I slammed the door. Big Dolores apologized to the officer and walked back to the door. She called out through the door. "What is it, Jujube?"

"You didn't have to call the cops! Shit, Dolores, you could have just called his mom!"

She asked the cops, who had followed her down the hall, if that was enough of a statement from the witness, and they said it was, so they left us.

Big Dolores rode out to get her own weed, then. She drove out to the place in Drummondville though it was almost two hours both ways.

She was probably pushing up against eighty years old, by then, and she drove regular, but she drove in the mid-morning once to get the milk to the two co-op stations

that bought in. She didn't drive over three hours to a place where she could score some speakeasy weed and Ritalin for my mom.

Third time out, she got pulled over in the snow. It was so cold, the cop that had her was wrapped up head to toe in the heaviest stuff he had, and unwrapped the scarf around his face before he got out of the car. She was being pulled over because she was driving erratically.

"The road's just slick," she said.

"You coming from Drummondville?"

"What's it to you where I'm coming from as long as I'm sober enough to drive?"

"I'm just asking because we're shutting down an illegal dispensary up there."

"What the hell do you care about an old woman driving in a snowstorm? I've got to go check the generator and heater in the barn. I've got cats to get in from the cold. goats to feed. What the hell do you care about me for? Write a ticket and let's go. I've got a goat farm, goddamit. I've got work."

"Got a tip on you," he said. "Got a tip you're carrying from a dispensary. Mind if I look around your vehicle? See if there's any illegal marijuana?"

"Goddammit, I mind. I'm old. I've got Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and I mind. I'm supposed to be using the stuff."

"Not if it's from an illegal dispensary. I've got a warrant," he said. He pulled it from his coat like a magic scroll. "We saw a vehicle matching yours at the dispensary this morning."

She was pulled out in the snow. She was handcuffed and left leaning against a tree. Another cop car showed up. Then another. They all had their lights flashing. She was sitting out in the freezing cold, nearly eighty and left sitting in the snowstorm with her hands bound. She was crying, her hands shaking. They found it right away, but they kept searching the car for anything. They piled everything she had—every bit of trash and detritus and maps and papers and a half-eaten bag of food and clothes and emergency kits—all in a heap next to the car while they were searching it. She watched everything get dumped into the snow. They wouldn't let her in from the cold until everything was poured out. The car was checked for explosives. She watched the men sticking the chemical strips against the cracks and crevices after explosives. What the hell would she be doing driving an explosive truck? A tow truck came. They said all her stuff was evidence and they were going to collect it.

Then, when she was shaking so bad from the cold she couldn't talk, and she was so pale and so cold, they got around to pushing her into the back of the police car.

They didn't even treat her like a person. They just pushed her around like a tired, old goat that had to be dragged by its horns. I think that's the worst, for her. She wasn't even treated like she was a person to them.

It was Petey that did it, I knew as soon as I heard. I was out with my mom, buying groceries at the time, on the way back from school, and I saw him in his truck driving down the street when he ought to have been locked up from the stealing and so many priors hanging over him. As soon as I heard from my mom, I knew that about my friend in a flash, like the way you know someone is going to be the love of your life, or someone is going to trip in a moment, or the way you just know someone is talking shit behind your back. It was Petey. That's who it was. That's exactly what happened.

I had that to simmer on a while. I had that to think about. I never told Mom that I saw him.

Momma and me were doing our best with the goats. It was a pain, and I hated Petey even more for this. I refused to blame the goats when it was Petey's fault. I did the milking, the mucking, and kept them locked in the barn when I was at school and Momma was sleeping. The cats, we didn't feed. We wanted them to wander off

into the cold. We didn't care if they froze or the coyotes got them as long as Dolores didn't see it. We wanted rid of the goddamn cats.

That was the worst winter of my life. I still have nightmares about it, up at dawn to deal with the bleating, stupid animals before school, and my mom sleepy at the wheel trying to get the milk to the co-op when she should have been getting ready for work, driving with drowsy eyes. That smell everywhere I turned, all over my clothes and hair, and it's so cold out, and I had to shovel the snow away from the barn door, and shovel the paths clear to mud. We went into the county prison to visit Dolores, who had to do a few months on her first charge. She sat there, shaking, knowing that her mind was going a little bit more every day and it would never come back, and that was a worse punishment than if they had killed her.

Big Dolores, she didn't have me inside. She didn't have my blood. I don't think the judge understood what it meant to separate her from me. She had Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and an obscure blood type, and she needed my blood to give hers a boost. We had to wait for her bail hearing just to see her the first week. She refused a lawyer. She said she was an old goat farmer and she couldn't afford a lawyer, and she couldn't afford dispensary drugs, and she didn't care what the judge did to her.

"So you're admitting your guilt," said the judge. "You're confessing in open court?"

"Your honor, I'm old enough to do what I ought to do. I do what I need to do, and I don't . . ." she took a breath, a deep breath. "I don't think it matters much if one old woman is doing what she can to get by. My head hurts, your honor. It hurts so much, and I can't eat. I have a shunt. My granddaughter helps me."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you confessed. You're pleading guilty, you refuse counsel, and I have to convict you."

She spent the minimum time in jail, but it was enough. At night, she didn't want my blood. She didn't want to sit with me on the couch and plug in to me, and watch TV. Momma asked her about it, and she said "Fuck that" and she drank whiskey in the snow, sitting next to a fire she had made out of scrap wood and old fence posts. She watched her goats. She held them to stay warm. They bleated for her. She hummed and sang to them. The snow kept coming that winter.

She was shaking bad when she got home, and it only got worse.

Petey drove by and knocked on the door. I was home to see him. I stood on one side of the screen, all that cold air coming in, but I wouldn't let him in the house.

"Hey," he said.

"Ain't you supposed to be in the city by now, working a sweatshop on Rockaway?"

"It'll be a while until I can save up. I wanted to come by and say I was sorry for what happened."

"Well, I don't care about that," I said.

I could tell he was drunk. It hit me that he was drunk, and he was wobbling a little and his eyes were lit up like coal fire. "Do you want to get some ice cream?"

"No," I said. "It's too cold. Besides, I only like boys my own age. Dolores is here. You want to apologize to her, you can."

"I heard Dolores got locked up," he said.

"She did. She's out. An old lady with no priors, she got the minimum they could give her."

"Yeah." He rubbed his naked neck. "I was lucky I wasn't around when they caught that one in Drummondville. I'd have been put away for years with my record."

"Ain't nobody lucky around here. You should wear a scarf," I said.

"Maybe," he said. "I got enough whiskey to keep myself warm."

"Ain't you got a scarf or something?"

"Yeah, at home."

"You should wear it. Well, Dolores is here. You want to see if she wants to hire you again, you talk to her about it. I don't think you should come back, though."

"I didn't think she would after she called the cops on me."

"You stole her wedding ring."

"You stole from her, too."

"That's not true," I said. "Don't say that."

"You did, though," he said. "You're an accomplice, and nobody caught you. I didn't rat you out, Jujube. I took the weight for you. Well, I'm going. Unless you want me to stay. Ain't it cold out here, though? I mean, goddamn it's so cold. I wish you'd invite me in. Or come out with me. One of the two."

"Don't ever say that again, Petey. You didn't do shit for me, and you only think you did."

"No ice cream, then?

"No," I said.

"You could come to my house. You ever been over to my house?"

"I've driven past it," I said. He had a sad house where he lived with his mother. She was a thin, hard-eyed woman, who had handled as much nonsense as anyone with the men in her life. Her husband was locked up, too. Their yard was a wreck. There was peeling paint. "I don't want to go over there. Your mom's there, right?"

"Not right now," he said.

"Well, I'm not going over there. Look, you should go. I've got chores."

"Did you have a while when you didn't have to open your arm up?" he said. He said it softly. "You know, when Dolores was in . . . ? I was thinking maybe it was good she got locked up so you wouldn't have to do that anymore."

I touched the shunt. It was there. It hadn't moved.

"She doesn't do it anymore," I said. "She stopped when she got arrested. I think Dolores has quit smoking dope, anyhow," I said. "Her only medicine is whiskey. That's still legal."

He nodded, uncomfortably. "Whiskey's good for warming up in the winter," he said. "That is true."

The wind was blowing. I was getting all that cold air in the house. I thought about stepping outside with him, but I also thought my father died in prison. He hadn't ratted anyone out for a walk.

"You done?" I said.

"Maybe I could see you later sometime," he said.

I shut the door. I heard him standing on the porch long after and I heard him walk to the end of the porch and crunch away into the snow. I heard him driving away.

Over dinner, Dolores looked over at me. "I heard that pickup truck of his driving up."

"I sent him away," I said. "I think he was drunk."

"That fool boy already out of prison, then? Didn't think he could make bail to save his life, and I half expected his momma to come calling to get the charges dropped. I knew he had a record before."

"He's been out, Dolores. He's been out since before you were put away."

"That fool. That little fool."

"You want to watch the TV tonight?" said my mom. "Have you been watching the box, Dolores?"

"Your mother called me Dottie," she said. "I don't have Alzheimer's that bad, yet. I remember things. I remember plenty. I still got a mind like a trap. Things go up there they never get out. Girl, eat your cabbage. Don't worry about me. I'm just an old woman, and I'm tired."

Momma poked at her food, but didn't eat it. She said she was on a diet, again. I

figured that meant she had found a man to date her. I figured there'd be dating around here, then, and she'd be in and out, distracted, and maybe there'd be a man's name to learn in the morning and maybe not. It had been a while since there was a man around for breakfast. Anyway, I didn't think anything about what she was saying. My shunt was probably no good for years, but we never bothered to check in with the doctor about it. We couldn't afford to check these things unless they were breaking.

Big Dolores told me she was going to go get the goats in the barn and I could come if I wanted. She said it like it meant something, the way she said it. She said it like she didn't want to be alone in the night, didn't want to feel like a criminal locked up for being too poor to buy drugs legal so she has to go to the illegal kind, and shaking and sick and sitting out in the cold while strange men in uniforms treat her like a bear they caught in a dumpster. She looked at me with this big, quiet, expectant face. "You want to come out with me, Jujube? We can check the goats together. It'll be like when you were just a baby."

"I wish everyone would stop calling me Jujube. And Junebug and Girl and all those other stupid nicknames. They're not my name," I said. "I have a name and nobody ever uses it. I'm June. I'm June Jiminez Nguyen. I wish you could just call me my real name, for once."

"Okay, June Jiminez Nguyen," she said. "I'll start calling you that if it's what you want."

I was pushing food around my plate. I was too sick and tired of waiting to eat.

She left us, for the yard lights and the snow everywhere.

"You're just sour 'cause your boyfriend got himself arrested stealing from us," said my mom. "Told you he was no good."

"He's not my boyfriend," I said. "I hate him, actually, and I don't know why everyone thinks we're anything. I want to kill him. I want to shoot him with a gun." I left in a huff. I went to my room.

I try to picture Dolores' life. I try to imagine it all laid out in a row, and I can't. I spent most of my life on the farm avoiding hers. She was a mystery, sitting on the porch and smoking while animals filled the old farmyard. She was out there when I got home from school. She was there, and we looked at each other over the wide expanse of time and emotion that divided us, because I resented being used for my blood, and I resented being forced to help her with the animals, and I resented being in that little town, way up in the north country where winters came like an annual disaster. How could I know what she felt for me? How could I know what she felt, when I was too immature to think of anyone but myself?

That night, Big Dolores went out to her goats in the barn. She chased them out into the freezing cold snow. She couldn't bear to hurt them. They were such strange, affectionate creatures, butting heads and rubbing up against her and sticking together no matter what. She didn't want them around her, right then. She tried to get the cats out, too, but that was next to impossible. There were so many of them, and they were hard to herd out into the cold, and she only had so much strength to finish the job after driving out the goats. She pulled the generator into the barn, shut the doors tight, closed all the windows, and flipped it on so the exhaust fumes would fill up the place. Gasoline ought to be illegal. I don't even know where she got that old generator. Some of her cats were in there with her, and she watched them falling down all over themselves, sinking into sleep before she did, but running from it and falling and tumbling like little clockwork dolls that wound down.

It was a long time before anything else happened. The goats were screaming from the cold, clattering to get into the barn and when that didn't work they came up to

the house. They were jumping up to the windows, climbing all over the porch and making all kinds of a racket. Momma was getting ready for work. She saw them, and she was angry that Dolores had let them get out and up to the house like that, and then she realized Dolores wouldn't have done that. Dolores wouldn't have thrown her goats out into the night on purpose, and if they got out she'd be the first to chase after them. She grabbed a coat and ran to the barn.

Dolores was in there, with her cats, and the generator running hard, full steam. It had been running long enough and the barn was just small enough and anyway Dolores was in such poor health by then that it didn't take much.

It wasn't long after the funeral, once the goats had all been sold off and the cats taken away by the county, that Momma took me in to get the surgery done, and in the hospital waiting room while we were figuring out what we could afford and we hadn't said anything to anybody about the shunt in my arm yet, except to see if we could afford a consultation about it, and we saw Petey come through bleeding in the head and throwing up being helped along by a volunteer firefighter. He had been in an accident. He was screaming. There was a cop behind him, talking into a radio. My momma jumped up for him, because we knew him and he was hurt, and she told me to stay with him while she called the boy's mother. I was running with him, then. He reached out a hand to me from the wheelchair they threw him into and he asked me what the hell I was doing there, and I asked him what the hell was he doing there. He was choking up blood so he couldn't say anything else. He was stoned and laughing about it, and then he was bound to a gurney.

He shouted my nickname through the blood, "*Jujube!*" He said that he loved me.

"This your boyfriend, Jujube?" said the nurse, the doctor, the cop. "Is this your boyfriend?"

"He's just a friend," I said. "Can I sit with him until his family gets here?"

Nobody stopped me.

He was in an accident. He was drunk and stoned and driving on icy back roads and in an accident and the cop and fireman that found him ran him in here until he was healed enough to be arrested. He had to get more blood in him. He had an IV filling him up with blood. He was B positive. It said so on the bag. I knew my mom was going to find us in this little country hospital. I knew the police would come in soon, and they were waiting in the hall writing reports and calling the DA to coordinate the evidence. I knew the doctor would only be a moment, too.

As soon as we had a moment alone, I opened the shunt on my arm, and sat with my back to the door so I'd have a second if someone walked in to cover it with a sheet or something. I pulled the outflow from my arm and gently peeled back the IV on his. I could find a vein, couldn't I? I had it right there in front of me, in my naked arm my whole life.

"What . . . ?" he mumbled something, but the painkillers had him mostly knocked out, the loss of blood and the marijuana and alcohol and head injury and wasted hours and wasted life. He was zoned out, stoned out, and nearly dead already.

"Big Dolores died because of you," I whispered. "You ratted her out and all of Drummondville. I know it. You sold her upriver so you could stay free as a bird."

I stuck the shuntline into his IV needle. I bled into him. I accepted no return line.

It didn't take long. A few minutes is all it takes to bleed out a pint. It doesn't take much to clot up things, and he had lost blood already, and had already had such damage done in the wreck. I slipped my shunt line back, and slipped it under my shirt. I carefully put his own IV line back in place, like nothing had happened.

"I didn't," he said, when I was doing it. "You hated her," he said. He was strapped down, and he was weak and no one would come if he shouted, if he could even man-

age to shout, and his body was turning purple like a bruise from where the blood was clotting along his arm. "You told me every day how much you hated her," he said.

I didn't say anything. It was almost done. I was staying to make sure he didn't push the button for the nurse to come. He never thought to push the button. I'm like my dad, and my granddad, deep down.

Big Dolores was mine to hate. She wasn't anyone else's. I would have opened my arm for her another twenty years if I had to. I would have done it forever.

I only had to do it that one last time, though, with Petey.

The nurses were there in minutes because of the way the monitors started beeping. I was already done, with my own shunt hidden up under my sleeve. They thought they had put the wrong type in, and they lost time trying to test his blood, trying to figure what his blood type was, while he was there, having a bad reaction, clotting up his arm, into his weak, wounded body, his eyes glazed over and getting pale and sicker by the second. They told me to step outside. I went without a word.

Nobody figured it out.

My momma believed me when I said I didn't want to have my own procedure in the same place he had died on account of bad blood. My type was rare enough I couldn't afford the risk.

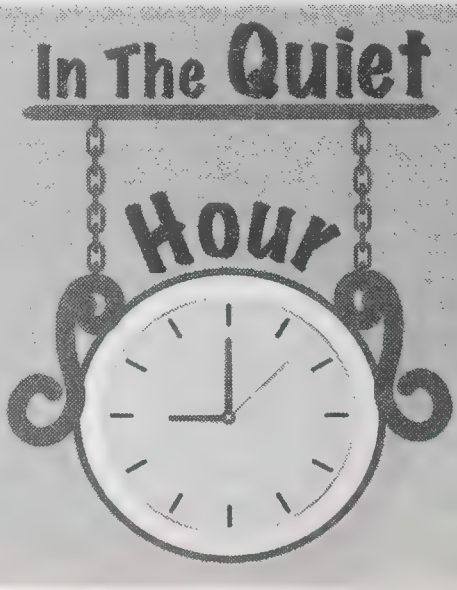
I still have the shunt. I could never afford to take it out.

I work in a factory in Rockaway, like I said. I help assemble little recycled tablets from the line and box them into storage containers for the trucks to haul to the shipyard. I sit alone in a big room, surrounded by machines. At night, I sleep in a dormitory with seventeen other women, who each work on different parts of the line. I have to rinse out the shunt when I shower with them, and they ask me what it is, and I tell them my grandmother had Parkinson's, and I was her blood type, and if I save up enough I can get the shunt removed. That's all I say about it.

I wonder how many people out there got stories burning them up inside, anger and fear and lonely nights leaving me staring into the way the teeth of the springs grip the blue mattress over my head. The springs chew at the cheap mattress until it wears down. I wonder how many people are like that, never saying a thing. I wonder what Dolores would have done if I had gone out with her that night, to check the goats.

I guess I'm going to save up again and get the shunt removed. I guess I'll live with the scar when it's done. ❍

In The Quiet Hour



In the quiet hour
we sit cross-legged
on the hardwood floor
in a soundproofed room
of white-walled plaster.

In the quiet hour
our Monitors turn off
the air conditioning
and it grows warmer.

In the quiet hour
we are never allowed
any distractions:
no videos, no music,
no games, no texts.

In the quiet hour
we are forbidden
to communicate with
others in any way.

In the quiet hour
we try to find marks
the trowel has left
on the plaster walls,
only to discover there
are no marks in their
blinding whiteness.

In the quiet hour
we search for flaws
in the polished floor,
only to realize that
each board has been
perfectly aligned.

In the quiet hour
we can look inside
the treacherous terrains
of interior landscapes,
knowing full well that
our Monitors, alien
telepaths one and all,
follow every twist and
turn of our thoughts.

In the quiet hour
those who violate rules
we have yet to understand
are taken from the room
by force and never return
for the next session.

In the quiet hour
we are not very safe
and it is seldom
quiet for long.

—Bruce Boston

SOMEDAY

James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly says, "I want to thank my friends in the Cambridge Science Fiction Workshop for helping me navigate this story through the gender minefields it attempts to explore. In other news, I'm working on a novel that will feature the further adventures of Mariska Volochkova, whom *Asimov's* readers may remember from 'Going Deep' (June 2009) and 'Plus or Minus' (December 2010)."

Daya had been in no hurry to become a mother. In the two years since she'd reached childbearing age, she'd built a modular from parts she'd fabbed herself, thrown her boots into the volcano, and served as blood judge. The village elders all said she was one of the quickest girls they had ever seen—except when it came to choosing fathers for her firstborn. Maybe that was because she was too quick for a sleepy village like Third Landing. When her mother, Tajana, had come of age, she'd left for the blue city to find fathers for her baby. Everyone expected Tajana would stay in Halfway, but she had surprised them and returned home to raise Daya. So once Daya had grown up, everyone assumed that someday she would leave for the city like her mother, especially after Tajana had been killed in the avalanche last winter. What did Third Landing have to hold such a fierce and able woman? Daya could easily build a glittering new life in Halfway. Do great things for the colony.

But everything had changed after the scientists from space had landed on the old site across the river, and Daya had changed most of all. She kept her own counsel and was often hard to find. That spring she had told the elders that she didn't need to travel to gather the right semen. Her village was happy and prosperous. The scientists had chosen it to study and they had attracted tourists from all over the colony. There were plenty of beautiful and convenient local fathers to take to bed. Daya had sampled the ones she considered best, but never opened herself to blend their sperm. Now she would, here in the place where she had been born.

She chose just three fathers for her baby. She wanted Ganth because he was her brother and because he loved her above all others. Latif because he was a leader and would say what was true when everyone else was afraid. And Bakti because he was a master of stories and because she wanted him to tell hers someday.

She informed each of her intentions to make a love feast, although she kept the identities of the other fathers a secret, as was her right. Ganth demanded to know, of course, but she refused him. She was not asking for a favor. It would be her baby, her responsibility. The three fathers, in turn, kept her request to themselves, as was custom, in case she changed her mind about any or all of them. A real possibility—when she contemplated what she was about to do, she felt separated from herself.

That morning she climbed into the pen and spoke a kindness to her pig Bobo. The

glint of the knife made him grunt with pleasure and he rolled onto his back, exposing the tumors on his belly. She hadn't harvested him in almost a week and so carved two fist-sized maroon swellings into the meat pail. She pressed strips of sponge root onto the wounds to stanch the bleeding and when it was done, she threw them into the pail as well. When she scratched under his jowls to dismiss him, Bobo squealed approval, rolled over and trotted off for a mud bath.

She sliced the tumors thin, dipped the pieces in egg and dragged them through a mix of powdered opium, pepper, flour, and bread crumbs, then sautéed them until they were crisp. She arranged them on top of a casserole of snuro, parsnips, and sweet flag, layered with garlic and three cheeses. She harvested some of the purple blooms from the petri dish on the windowsill and flicked them on top of her love feast. The aphrodisiacs produced by the bacteria would give an erection to a corpse. She slid the casserole into the oven to bake for an hour while she bathed and dressed for babymaking.

Daya had considered the order in which she would have sex with the fathers. Last was most important, followed by first. The genes of the middle father—or fathers, since some mothers made babies with six or seven for political reasons—were less reliably expressed. She thought starting with Ganth for his sunny nature and finishing with Latif for his looks and good judgment made sense. Even though Bakti was clever, he had bad posture.

Ganth sat in front of a fuzzy black and white screen with his back to her when she nudged the door to his house open with her hip. "It's me. With a present."

He did not glance away from his show—the colony's daily news and gossip program about the scientists—but raised his forefinger in acknowledgment.

She carried the warming dish with oven mitts to the huge round table that served as his desk, kitchen counter, and sometime closet. She pushed aside some books, a belt, an empty bottle of blueberry kefir, and a Fill Jumphigher action figure to set her love feast down. Like her own house, Ganth's was a single room, but his was larger, shabbier, and built of some knotty softwood.

Her brother took a deep breath, his face pale in the light of the screen. "Smells delicious." He pressed the off button; the screen winked and went dark.

"What's the occasion?" He turned to her, smiling. "*Oh*." His eyes went wide when he saw how she was dressed. "Tonight?"

"Tonight." She grinned.

Trying to cover his surprise, he pulled out the pocket watch he'd had from their mother and then shook it as if it were broken. "Why, look at the time. I totally forgot that we were grown up."

"You like?" She weaved her arms and her ribbon robe fluttered.

"I was wondering when you'd come. What if I had been out?"

She nodded at the screen in front of him. "You never miss that show."

"Has anyone else seen you?" He sneaked to the window and peered out. A knot of gawkers had gathered in the street. "What, did you parade across Founders' Square dressed like that? You'll give every father in town a hard on." He pulled the blinds and came back to her. He surprised her by going down on one knee. "So which am I?"

"What do you think?" She lifted the cover from the casserole to show that it was steaming and uncut.

"I'm honored." He took her hand in his and kissed it. "Who else?" he said. "And you have to tell. Tomorrow everyone will know."

"Bakti. Latif last."

"Three is all a baby really needs." He rubbed his thumb across the inside of her wrist. "Our mother would approve."

Of course, Ganth had no idea of what their mother had really thought of him.

Tajana had once warned Daya that if she insisted on choosing Ganth to father her baby, she should dilute his semen with that of the best men in the village. A sweet manner is fine, she'd said, but babies need brains and a spine.

"So, dear sister, it's a sacrifice . . ." he said, standing. ". . . but I'm prepared to do my duty." He caught her in his arms.

Daya squawked in mock outrage.

"You're not surprising the others, are you?" He nuzzled her neck.

"No, they expect me."

"Then we'd better hurry. I hear that Eldest Latif goes to bed early." His whisper filled her ear. "Carrying the weight of the world on his back tires him out."

"I'll give him reason to wake up."

He slid a hand through the layers of ribbons until he found her skin. "Bakti, on the other hand, stays up late, since his stories weigh nothing at all." The flat of his hand against her belly made her shiver. "I didn't realize you knew him that well."

She tugged at the hair on the back of Ganth's head to get his attention. "Feasting first," she said, her voice husky. Daya hadn't expected to be this emotional. She opened her pack, removed the bottle of chardonnay and poured two glasses. They saluted each other and drank, then she used the spatula she had brought—since she knew her brother wouldn't have one—to cut a square of her love feast. He watched her scoop it onto a plate like a man uncertain of his luck. She forked a bite into her mouth. The cheese was still melty—maybe a bit too much sweet flag. She chewed once, twice and then leaned forward to kiss him. His lips parted and she let the contents of her mouth fall into his. He groaned and swallowed. "Again." His voice was thick. "Again and again and again."

Afterward they lay entangled on his mattress on the floor. "I'm glad you're not leaving us, Daya." He blew on the ribbons at her breast and they trembled. "I'll stay home to watch your baby," he said. "Whenever you need me. Make life so easy, you'll never want to go."

It was the worst thing he could have said; until that moment she had been able to keep from thinking that she might never see him again. He was her only family, except for the fathers her mother had kept from her. Had Tajana wanted to make it easy for her to leave Third Landing? "What if I get restless here?" Daya's voice could have fit into a thimble. "You know me."

"Okay, maybe someday you can leave." He waved the idea away. "Someday."

She glanced down his lean body at the hole in his sock and dust strings dangling from his bookshelf. He was a sweet boy and her brother, but he played harder than he worked. Ganth was content to let the future happen to him; Daya needed to make choices, no matter how hard. "It's getting late." She pressed her cheek to his. "Do me a favor and check on Bobo in the morning? Who knows when I'll get home."

By the time she kissed Ganth goodbye, it was evening. An entourage of at least twenty would-be spectators trailed her to Old Town; word had spread that the very eligible Daya was bringing a love feast to some lucky fathers. There was even a scatter of tourists, delighted to witness Third Landing's quaint mating ritual. The locals told jokes, made ribald suggestions and called out names of potential fathers. She tried to ignore them; some people in this village were so nosy.

Bakti lived in one of the barn-like stone dormitories that the settlers had built two centuries ago across the river from their landing spot. Most of these buildings were now divided into shops and apartments. When Daya finally revealed her choice by stopping at Bakti's door, the crowd buzzed. Winners of bets chirped, losers groaned. Bakti was slow to answer her knock, but when he saw the spectators, he seized her arm and drew her inside.

Ganth had been right: she and Bakti weren't particularly close. She had never

been to his house, although he had visited her mother on occasion when she was growing up. She could see that he was no better a housekeeper than her brother, but at least his mess was all of a kind. The bones of his apartment had not much changed from the time the founders had used it as a dormitory; Bakti had preserved the two walls of wide shelves that they had used as bunks. Now, however, instead of sleeping refugees from Genome Crusades, they were filled with books, row upon extravagant row. This was Bakti's vice; not only did he buy cheap paper from the village stalls; he had purchased hundreds of hardcovers on his frequent trips to the blue city. They said he even owned a few print books that the founders had brought across space. There were books everywhere, open on chairs, chests, the couch, stacked in leaning towers on the floor.

"So you've come to rumple my bed?" He rearranged his worktable to make room for her love feast. "I must admit, I was surprised by your note. Have we been intimate before, Daya?"

"Just once." She set the dish down. "Don't pretend that you don't remember." When she unslung the pack from her back, the remaining bottles of wine clinked together.

"Don't pretend?" He spread his hands. "I tell stories. That's all I do."

"Glasses?" She extracted the zinfandel from her pack.

He brought two that were works of art; crystal stems twisted like vines to flutes as delicate as a skim of ice. "I recall a girl with a pansy tattooed on her back," he said.

"You're thinking of Pandi." Daya poured the wine.

"Do you sing to your lovers?"

She sniffed the bouquet. "Never." They saluted each other and drank.

"Don't rush me now," he said. "I'm enjoying this little game." He lifted the lid of the dish and breathed in. "Your feast pleases the nose as much as you please the eye. But I see that I am not your first stop. Who else have you seen this night?"

"Ganth."

"You chose a grasshopper to be a father of your child?"

"He's my brother."

"Aha!" He snapped his fingers. "Now I have it. The garden at Tajana's place? I recall a very pleasant evening."

She had forgotten how big Bakti's nose was. "As do I." And his slouch was worse than ever. Probably from carrying too many books.

"I don't mind being the middle, you know." He took another drink of wine. "Prefer it actually—less responsibility that way. I will do my duty as a father, but I must tell you right now that I have no interest whatsoever in bringing up your baby. And her next father is?"

"Latif. Next and last."

"A man who takes fathering seriously. Good, he'll balance out poor Ganth. I will tell her stories, though. Your baby girl. That's what you hope for, am I right? A girl?"

"Yes." She hadn't realized it until he said it. A girl would make things much easier.

He paused, as if he had just remembered something. "But you're supposed to leave us, aren't you? This village is too tight a fit for someone of your abilities. You'll split seams, pop a button."

Why did everyone keep saying these things to her? "*You* didn't leave."

"No." He shook his head. "I wasn't as big as I thought I was. Besides, the books keep me here. Do you know how much they weigh?"

"It's an amazing collection." She bent to the nearest shelf and ran a finger along the spines of the outermost row. "I've heard you have some from Earth."

"Is this about looking at books or making babies, Daya?" Bakti looked crestfallen.

She straightened, embarrassed. "The baby, of course."

"No, I get it." He waved a finger at her. "I'm crooked and cranky and mothers shut

their eyes tight when we kiss." He reached for the wine bottle. "Those are novels." He nodded at the shelf. "But no, nothing from Earth."

They spent the better part of an hour browsing. Bakti said Daya could borrow some if she wanted. He said reading helped pregnant mothers settle. Then he told her the story from one of them. It was about a boy named Huckleberry Flynn, who left his village on Novy Praha to see his world but then came back again. "Just like your mother did," he said. "Just like you could, if you wanted. Someday."

"Then you could tell stories about me."

"About this night," he agreed, "if I remember." His grin was seductive. "Will I?"

"Have you gotten any books from them?" She glanced out the dark window toward the river. "Maybe they'd want to trade with you?"

"Them?" he said. "You mean our visitors? Some, but digital only. They haven't got time for nostalgia. To them, my books are as quaint as scrolls and clay tablets. They asked to scan the collection, but I think they were just being polite. Their interests seem to be more sociological than literary." He smirked. "I understand you have been spending time across the river."

She shrugged. "Do you think they are telling the truth?"

"About what? Their biology? Their politics?" He gestured at his library. "I own one thousand, two hundred and forty-three claims of truth. How would I know which is right?" He slid the book about the boy Huckleberry back onto the shelf. "But look at the time! If you don't mind, I've been putting off dinner until you arrived. And then we can make a baby and a memory, yes?"

By the time Daya left him snoring on his rumpled bed, the spectators had all gone home for the night. There was still half of the love feast left, but the warming dish was beginning to dry it out. She hurried down the Farview Hill to the river.

Many honors had come to Latif over the years and with them great wealth. He had first served as village eldest when he was still a young man, just thirty-two years old. In recent years, he mediated disputes for those who did not have the time or the money to submit to the magistrates of the blue city. The fees he charged had bought him this fine house of three rooms, one of which was the parlor where he received visitors. When she saw that all the windows were dark, she gave a cry of panic. It was nearly midnight and the house was nothing but a shadow against the silver waters.

On the shore beyond, the surreal bulk of the starship beckoned.

Daya didn't even bother with the front door. She went around to the bedroom and stood on tiptoes to knock on his window. *Tap-tap*.

Nothing.

"Latif." *Tap-tap-tap*. "Wake up."

She heard a clatter within. "Shit!" A light came on and she stepped away as the window banged open.

"Who's there? Go away."

"It's me, Daya."

"Do you know what time it is? Go away."

"But I have our love feast. You knew this is the night, I sent a message."

"And I waited, but you took too damn long." He growled in frustration. "Can't you see I'm asleep? Go find some middle who's awake."

"No, Latif. You're my last."

He started with a shout. "You wake me in the middle of the night . . ." Then he continued in a low rasp. "Where's your sense, Daya, your manners? You expect me to be your last? You should have said something. I take fathering seriously."

Daya's throat closed. Her eyes seemed to throb.

"I told you to move to the city, didn't I? Find fathers there." Latif waited for her to

answer. When she didn't, he stuck his head out the window to see her better. "So instead of taking my best advice, now you want my semen?" He waited again for a reply; she couldn't speak. "I suppose you're crying."

The only reply she could make was a sniffle.

"Come to the door then."

She reached for his arm as she entered the darkened parlor, but he waved her through to the center of the room. "You are rude and selfish, Daya." He shut the door and leaned against it. "But that doesn't mean you're a bad person."

He turned the lights on and for a moment they stood blinking at one another. Latif was barefoot, wearing pants but no shirt. He had a wrestler's shoulders, long arms, hands big as dinner plates. Muscles bunched beneath his smooth, dark skin, as if he might spring at her. But if she read his eyes right, his anger was passing.

"I thought you'd be pleased." She tried a grin. It bounced off him.

"Honored, yes. Pleased, not at all. You think you can just issue commands and we jump? You have the right to ask, and I have the right to refuse. Even at the last minute."

At fifty-three, Latif was still one of the handsomest men in the village. Daya had often wondered if that was one reason why everyone trusted him. She looked for some place to put the warming dish down.

"No," he said, "don't you dare make yourself comfortable unless I tell you to. Why me?"

She didn't have to think. "Because you have always been kind to me and my mother. Because you will tell the truth, even when it's hard to hear. And because, despite your years, you are still the most beautiful man I know." This time she tried a smile on him. It stuck. "All the children you've fathered are beautiful, and if my son gets nothing but looks from you, that will still be to his lifelong advantage." Daya knew that in the right circumstance, even men like Latif liked flattery.

"You want me because I tell hard truths, but when I say you should move away, you ignore me. Does that make sense?"

"Not everything needs to make sense." She extended her love feast to him. "Where should I put this?"

He glided across the parlor, kissed her forehead and accepted the dish from her. "Do you know how many have asked me to be last father?"

"No." She followed him into the great room.

"Twenty-three," he said. "Every one spoke to me ahead of time. And of those, how many I agreed to?"

"No idea."

"Four." He set it on a round wooden table with a marble inset.

"They should've tried my ambush strategy." She shrugged out of her pack. "I've got wine." She handed him the bottle of Xino she had picked for him.

"Which you've been drinking all night, I'm sure. You know where the glasses are." He pulled the stopper. "And who have you been drinking with?"

"Ganth, first."

Latif tossed the stopper onto the table. "I'm one-fourth that boy's father . . ." He rapped on the tabletop. ". . . but I don't see any part of me in him."

"He's handsome."

"Oh, stop." He poured each of them just a splash of the Xino and offered her a glass. She raised an eyebrow at his stinginess.

"It's late and you've had enough," he said. "It is affecting your judgment. Who else?"

"Bakti."

"You surprise me." They saluted each other with their glasses. "Does he really have Earth books?"

"He says not."

"He makes too many stories up. But he's sound—you should have started with him. Ganth is a middle father at best."

Both of them ran out of things to say then. Latif was right. She had finished the first two bottles with the other fathers, and had shared a love feast with them and had made love. She was heavy with the weight of her decisions and her desires. She felt like she was falling toward Latif. She pulled the cover off the warming dish and cut a square of her love feast into bite-sized chunks.

"Just because I'm making a baby doesn't mean I can't go away," she said.

"And leave the fathers behind?"

"That's what my mother did."

"And did that make her happy? Do you think she had an easy life?" He shook his head. "No, you are tying yourself to this village. This little, insignificant place. Why? Maybe you're lazy. Or maybe you're afraid. Here, you are a star. What would you be in the blue city?"

She wanted to tell him that he had it exactly wrong. That he was talking about himself, not her. But that would have been cruel. This beautiful, foolish man was going to be the last father of her baby. "You're right," Daya said. "It's late." She piled bits of the feast onto a plate and came around to where he was sitting. She perched on the edge of the table and gazed down at him.

He tugged at one of the ribbons of her sleeve and she felt the robe slip off her shoulder. "What is this costume anyway?" he said. "You're wrapped up like some kind of present."

She didn't reply. Instead she pushed a bit of the feast across her plate until it slid onto her fork. They watched each other as she brought it to her open mouth, placed it on her tongue. The room shrank. Clocks stopped.

He shuddered, "Feed me, then."

Latif's pants were still around his ankles when she rolled off him. The ribbon robe dangled off the headboard of his bed. Daya gazed up at the ceiling, thinking about the tangling sperm inside her. She concentrated as her mother had taught her, and she thought she felt her cervix close and her uterus contract, concentrating the semen. At least, she hoped she did. The sperm of the three fathers would smash together furiously, breaching cell walls, exchanging plasmids. The strongest conjugate would find her eggs and then . . .

"What if I leave the baby behind?" she said.

"With who?" He propped himself up on an elbow. "Your mother is dead and no . . ."

She laid a finger on his lips. "I know, Latif. But why not with a father? Ganth might do it, I think. Definitely not Bakti. Maybe even you."

He went rigid. "This is an idea you get from the scientists? Is that the way they have sex in space?"

"They don't live in space; they just travel through it." She followed a crack in the plaster of his ceiling with her eyes. "Nobody lives in space." A water stain in the corner looked like a face. A mouth. Sad eyes. "What should we do about them?"

"Do? There is nothing to be done." He fell back onto his pillow. "They're the ones the founders were trying to get away from."

"Two hundred years ago. They say things are different."

"Maybe. Maybe these particular scientists are more tolerant, but they're still dangerous."

"Why? Why are you so afraid of them?"

"*Because they're unnatural.*" The hand at her side clenched into a fist. "We're the true humans, maybe the last. But they've taken charge of evolution now, or what passes for it. We have no say in the future. All we know for sure is that they are large and still growing and we are very, very small. Maybe this lot won't force us to change. Maybe someday they'll just make us want to become like them."

She knew this was true, even though she had spent the last few months trying not to know it. The effort had made her weary. She rolled toward Latif. When she snuggled against him, he relaxed into her embrace.

It was almost dawn when she left his house. Instead of climbing back up Farview Hill, she turned toward the river. Moments later she stepped off Mogallo's Wharf into the skiff she had built when she was a teenager.

She had been so busy pretending that this wasn't going to happen that she was surprised to find herself gliding across the river. She could never have had sex with the fathers if she had acknowledged to herself that she was going to go through with it. Certainly not with Ganth. And Latif would have guessed that something was wrong. She had the odd feeling that there were two of her in the skiff, each facing in opposite directions. The one looking back at the village was screaming at the one watching the starship grow ever larger. But there is no other Daya, she reminded herself. There is only me.

Her lover, Roberts, was waiting on the spun-carbon dock that the scientists had fabbed for river traffic. Many of the magistrates from the blue city came by boat to negotiate with the offworlders. Roberts caught the rope that Daya threw her and took it expertly around one of the cleats. She extended a hand to hoist Daya up, caught her in an embrace and pressed her lips to Daya's cheek.

"This kissing that you do," said Roberts. "I like it. Very direct." She wasn't very good at it, but she was learning. Like all the scientists, she could be stiff at first. They didn't seem all that comfortable in their replaceable bodies. Roberts was small as a child, but with a woman's face. Her blonde hair was cropped short, her eyes were clear and faceted. They reminded Daya of her mother's crystal.

"It's done," said Daya.

"Yes, but are you all right?"

"I think so." She forced a grin. "We'll find out."

"We will. Don't worry, love, I am going to take good care of you. And your baby."

"And I will take care of you."

"Yes." She looked puzzled. "Of course."

Roberts was a cultural anthropologist. She had explained to Daya that all she wanted was to preserve a record of an ancient way of life. A culture in which there was still sexual reproduction.

"May I see that?"

Daya opened her pack and produced the leftover bit of the love feast. She had sealed it in a baggie that Roberts had given her. It had somehow frozen solid.

"Excellent. Now we should get you into the lab before it's too late. Put you under the scanner, take some samples." This time she kissed Daya on the mouth. Her lips parted briefly and Daya felt Roberts' tongue flick against her teeth. When Daya did not respond, she pulled back.

"I know this is hard now. You're very brave to help us this way, Daya." The scientist took her hand and squeezed. "But someday they'll thank you for what you're doing." She nodded toward the sleepy village across the river. "Someday soon." ○

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THE PRINCIPLES

Robert Reed

Bob Reed remarks, "For a lot of years, I've been working on a giant alternate-history novel. This is a part-time project, mostly. The story is wrapped around the spectacle of ordinary life, and while some details have been pulled from my past, the interesting stuff is mostly invented. My protagonist, Quentin Maurus, endures quite a lot. 'The Principles' is one of those adventures, teased free from the story's body and the action compressed, building what might be confused for a traditional story." The author's first novel in years comes out this spring. *The Memory of Sky* is a Great Ship story published by Prime Books. He is also flirting with self-publishing a collection called *The Greatship,* which strings together most of his tales in the Marrow universe.

A word of warning: This story contains scenes that may be disturbing to some readers.

Honest labor made for honorable men. Every woman understood that principle, and that's why when Quentin turned thirteen, a lawn-cutting business was born. His mother rounded up local war widows and elderly dykes, and his father showed him how to mix gasoline with the oil and how to curse at the old mower's quirks. Then with pleas for safety and a manly slap to the back, one generation sent the next into the honorable world of commerce.

Madam Lorton walked her yard afterward, making certain her warhorns and roses were still standing.

Madam Codmarm insisted on giving orange-and-fizz treats before inventing new ways to shortchange the child.

Because Christian mothers often stole from their sons, Madam Bernstein made certain that Quentin had an extra blue bill to hide outside his wallet.

Across the street from Madam Bernstein lived a young widow named Madam Dobs. Her husband died in Vietnam, making her an object of pity in the neighborhood. She wasn't one of the boy's clients, but one afternoon she stepped out

on her porch, smiling when she promised to double his wages if her yard was cut today.

Quentin readily agreed. But the Sussex-gold in her yard looked like hay, and the windfall soon became a torment of endless pushing and bag dumping. Drenched in sweat, Quentin paused to gasp, and looking up, found the lady watching him from behind her storm door, wearing nothing but a small shirt with no bra, and no pants, white legs ending inside slender panties that couldn't have been more red.

He stopped in the middle of the half-cut yard.

She asked, "What's wrong, Quentin?"

The mower wasn't powerful enough, he explained. He was tired and it was dinnertime and maybe he could finish tomorrow.

"Would you like something to drink, Quentin?"

Very much. But that wasn't the subject of the moment.

"Come here," she advised.

He climbed one porch step and another, reaching a vantage point where he could see twisted black hairs pushing out from under the panties' elastic.

He stayed where he was, and eventually she said, "Come back tomorrow then."

And he rolled the exhausted mower home.

Dad didn't show for dinner, which was happening more and more. The kitchen television was turned to the news. Some little battle had been fought on the Armistice Line, twenty Queensland soldiers dead but plenty of Mongols too. Then the phone sang out. "Hello, Madam Bernstein, how are you?" Mom began. The Jewish lady said she was well, thank you, and then she mentioned something about Madam Dobs. Mom pulled the phone cord as far as it would reach, leaving the kitchen, and after a couple of minutes she returned and hung up, thinking carefully before giving her son the most important sex lesson of his life.

"Women are dangerous," she said. "And men are weak, impulsive animals. That's how women manipulate you, and sometimes in the most cruel ways. You don't want to fall for their traps. Do you understand me, Quentin?"

Quentin wasn't sure what he understood. But feeling an obligation, he asked, "What about Madam Dob's grass?"

"Her grass isn't your problem," his mother assured, answering his question as well as the one she heard.

In 1839, the Reformed Church of the United purchased creekbottom ground from the local Otoe tribe. Warner College and the hamlet of Eureka were built on the prairie wilderness. But just two years later, the Otoe sold the adjacent country to what became the provincial capital, and a century later, Eureka was surrounded and legally incorporated.

Yet the character of the old town refused to change. The campus would always be a collection of venerable brick buildings and Queensland elms. The local houses were built in the United-style, big and white with a fondness for square windows and oddly narrow doors. The original main street retained its scruffy charm as well as little shops, some of them generations old. Even in the 1970s, the only glass-and-steel buildings stood apart from the rest of Eureka. There was a Safeguard grocery and an abortion clinic, a modern laundry and a large discount warehouse courageously billing itself as Treasure City. In his first week at college, Quentin Maurus visited Treasure City looking for aspirin and for socks. What he found instead was a long aisle dedicated to cut-rate paperback books. Organization was deliciously minimal in those wire racks. Mysteries and women stories shared pockets with celebrity biographies and histories of popular wars. Invisible hands often hid the futurist fictions, but they were waiting to be discovered, and four years later, Quentin was shouldering both a degree

in biology as well as a considerable library of acid-licked novels, each decorated with moons and stars and sleek rockets that most likely would never survive launch.

He was a graduate, but Eureka still felt like home. The college had libraries and two girls for every male student. The neighborhood was full of houses converted to cheap apartments. Madam Lane was a dyke landlady who didn't trust men, but Quentin offered to double the normal deposit, and that's why she led him up a long staircase dressed with green carpeting and dirty white paint. An exceptionally narrow door led inside an empty apartment wearing more green carpet. What convinced him to stay—besides the big, oddly shaped rooms and the minimal rent, the iron radiators and peeling wallpaper, and those huge, ill-fitted windows—was the built-in bookshelves that covered every available wall.

"My handyman put them up," Madam Lane explained, fiddling with the steel rings on her arthritic fingers.

Not even Quentin had enough books to fill the available space.

Here was a challenge worth taking.

There weren't many local jobs for biologists, particularly if they happened to be males in their early twenties. Everybody asked Quentin why he wasn't serving the military or some other good public post, but honest answers didn't win over employers who had already made up their minds. Thankfully a nearby factory coveted young backs. Quentin was hired on the spot. Days were dusty and often hot but he was paid well enough, and every evening he stuffed filthy clothes inside an old white duffel—a family relic with great-uncle Clovis' name and army unit stenciled on the sides. Whenever the relic was ready to explode, Quentin would drive or walk to the neighborhood laundry, and those days were like any other: Nothing interesting happened, and the rest of his life looked to be just as relentlessly bland.

One evening, a familiar face passed through the laundry door. Quentin and the newcomer exchanged polite smiles. That would be that, he assumed, tossing socks into the washer. He was reading a Johnsgal novel when the woman happened past, saying, "Good evening, Mr. Maurus."

He rose and bowed. "Good evening, Dr. West."

The professor had given him a P-minus in Ancient Governments, and now she was dropping bras into an adjacent washer. That was worth a secret laugh. Reclaiming his plastic chair, Quentin read another two pages of battling starships. Then he looked up to find Dr. West standing closer than he'd expected, that small smart face showing something completely unexpected: A distinct, endearing nervousness.

The woman was supposedly brilliant and undoubtedly she was demanding, as inflexible as an old Roman wall or the Mongolian bureaucracy. The history of the world lived inside her head, and while lecturing, Dr. West needed neither notes nor punctuation, nor any air. Drop your pen, her students joked, and a full century would slip away.

Quentin was nervous enough to laugh.

The woman found some reason to laugh with him.

She was shorter than he recalled—the difference between being a tenured professor and a forty-year-old lady. There were no rings on any finger, steel or gold, and the watery brown hair was tied up in a chignon, and her oyster-shaped glasses hadn't been in style for several years. And like quite a few effective speakers, the woman knew what it felt like to be shy.

She glanced at Quentin's book, at the obligatory rocket ship.

He took a long walk to the dryers.

When he returned, she said, "I suppose you're following the Mars mission."

"Always."

So they discussed the ambitious Mongolian space program, and then they talked about their government's moon base. Dr. West sat beside the graduate, only one empty chair between them. Not a gesture or word was improper, yet Quentin had to wonder what the woman was thinking. He tried to guess what was inside his own busy head. Meanwhile his clothes continued baking inside the dryers, and he finally saved them just before they scorched.

Folding nothing, he stuffed hot shirts and socks inside the duffelbag.

The professor studied the Clovis' name, the unit markings.

"My uncle helped build the Aleut Road in the twenties," he explained. "When he wasn't fishing for grayling, that is."

Dr. West smiled. She was smiling at her own clean clothes. Her basket had fewer items, and she hadn't cooked them. In a world built on coincidences, the two of them finished their laundry at the same moment.

"Back into the cold," Quentin announced, throwing the hot bag over his shoulder.

It was only November, but snow was falling again. Looking into the darkness, the lady asked, "Would you like a ride home, Mr. Maurus?"

What surprised Quentin was his lack of surprise.

"That would be nice," he said.

An old yellow Trailbreaker was waiting at the door. Two minutes later, they pulled up in front of the plain white house. Quentin turned to her, saying, "Thank you very much, Dr. West."

Garish Christmas decorations were burning in the neighbor's yard, making the woman's face red. With a nervous little grin, she said, "It's been my good pleasure, Mr. Maurus."

She leaned toward him, and he leaned toward her.

And because they were smart people, they hesitated, doing nothing for a moment while each considered a universe full of immeasurable ramifications.

Katerini Tan was the most famous, most scandalous scientist in the Western world. In her autobiography, *The Principles,* she wrote about growing up as the genius child of a Han woman and an Egyptian man. Vivid tales of her affairs with famous men and their beautiful wives led to the making of a bestseller. Dr. Tan often claimed that her extraordinary talents with mathematics and with sex came from a profoundly masculinized brain. Who else could write such amazing ideas? Quentin read the book twice in college, and he reread it a third time afterward, but what was the strangest and best about *The Principles* was Tan's cosmology:

The universe was built on its own desperate infinity.

Matter and energy occupied every possible position, every mandated state, and in its fundamental heart, existence was nothing but a series of intense, perfectly rendered photographs.

Dr. Tan claimed that human opinion was built entirely on human ignorance.

Even the greatest people were nothing but alignments of soulless atomic particles, and similar particles could line up in nearly identical ways, pretending to be joined by something called Time.

According to the mathematics, time did not exist.

Every life and every potential history were nothing but the lines that could be drawn between unvanquishable, eternally frozen faces.

The warm bag rode Quentin's right shoulder.

Ten quadrillion slices of reality portrayed two people on the staircase.

Dr. West watched her companion fish keys from his pocket and unlock the door, and saying nothing, she followed him inside.

Quentin dropped his laundry on a slumping old chair. She looked at the chair and his hands and the air beside his face—everywhere but directly at his eyes—and then she quietly told somebody, "I should leave."

"No," Quentin said. "Stay."

Her hands grabbed one another.

One reading lamp had been left burning. Quentin turned off the light and kissed her mouth while reaching inside her heavy brown coat, and she pushed him away until he reached again.

"Wait," she said.

Leaning forward, she wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed—not a hug so much as a wrestler's confining pose. Quentin felt her breathing, felt her heart working. A lot of professors generated scandalous rumors. Not this professor, at least nothing he could remember. And after nothing changed for what seemed like too long, Quentin began to believe that yes, maybe she should leave.

Then the woman took one deep breath, her right hand running down the front of his pants.

She didn't fling him onto the mattress, but Quentin felt flung, and she deftly climbed on top of the naked man, assuming the Feast of the Sabbath position. Her climax was quick and loud, and she returned the favor with desperate, self-absorbed intensity. Then she allowed him ten seconds of calm before demanding another round.

Then they pulled apart, and they dressed.

Quentin mentioned not knowing her first name.

"Sandra."

He repeated the name carefully.

She put on her brown coat and Quentin put on his jacket, and with an edge to her voice, Sandra said, "You don't have to walk me out."

"But my car's parked back at the laundry," he said.

She had a fine laugh. Yet this time she didn't offer transportation.

In the snowy street, she said, "Good night, Quentin."

"Good night, Sandra," he said, the name still uncomfortable to say.

There was no touch of gloved hands. No last look. The lady was embarrassed, or maybe astonished by what she had done. Or maybe she did this kind of thing all the time, and she was disappointed or already bored with him. Unless Sandra was wracked by guilt or some weird despair. Quentin couldn't guess anything about her nature.

With a deep bark, the old Trailbreaker pulled away—an emblem of the miserable pay for professors—and Quentin began his cold walk.

A large, loud family lived across the street. But in late November, with fresh snow on the ground and wind slicing from the Polar Star, that big plain house was eerily peaceful. Quentin paused, staring at the decorative lights, reds and whites predominating. The traditional manger was built from cheap pine that was badly weathered. Over the years, dolls and toy animals had replaced critical players. The wrong sort of camel stood in the snow, and one of the Wise Men had enjoyed an earlier career as a toy soldier. But the baby looked original. A bright spotlight shone on the plastic straw, and the Child of God lay swaddled in plastic cloth, her face not just feminine but exceptionally pretty, smiling bravely at the incandescent, softly humming Christmas star.

Enormous rivers once flowed from the interior of the ancestral Africa. Two billion years ago, the earth was an alien world. Days were swift, the moon too close in the sky, and there were no trees or grass and precious little oxygen. Erosion scoured

whatever it wanted, leaving vast deltas of sediment resting against the unnamed seas. In that younger earth, radioactive isotopes had different abundances. Chance and the sorting action of the runoff concentrated uranium into small areas, and the passing river water slowed the escaping neutrons, aiding interactions with neighboring fissionables, producing heat as well as a peculiar ash still visible today.

Eventually the river would boil, geysers towering over the stark wilderness.

According to *Science Queensland,* for hundreds of thousands of years those geysers would roar until the sediments dried out, and with nothing to slow the neutrons, the chain reactions collapsed, allowing the delta to cool and fresh water to flow back into the reaction zones, which soon triggered the nuclear blaze to begin all over again.

Quentin was smiling while he read the article.

And then a student emerged from the stacks, and his focus jumped.

She was carrying a book against her chest. He remembered that body and her name, and she remembered his name. Their conversation was polite, leading to the point where she asked why he was here. "Didn't you graduate?"

"But I can't leave," he said. "These journals have voices. They beg me to come read them."

The girl didn't quite smile, her body rocking slowly while she looked at the upside-down title. Then with a cluck of the tongue, she said, "That looks horribly boring."

Quentin remembered that he never liked the girl. Shrugging, he turned to the next article.

And she made her escape.

Page after page was filled with color images from the Vanguard probe. Leda was a cratered sphere, airless and cold; giant Europa was wrinkled in places by ancient tectonics. But the smooth white face of Io was tantalizingly young, a realm of thick pack ice and what might be a hidden ocean. And floating in front of glorious Jupiter was the angry, sulfurous orange face of Semele, bathed in radiation, an army of volcanoes trying to tear that moon apart.

Quentin found her sorting laundry.

It was the Monday after Christmas. Sandra smiled when she saw him. She smiled out of reflex and then in a warmer, more impressive fashion, pulling her basket out of the way so they could work together, washing and drying their belongings before two cars drove to his apartment.

As if they had done this a thousand times, they went upstairs and lights were turned off and the yellowed blinds were pulled, and then they stripped out of coats and clothes before duplicating the first coupling. Afterward she turned around on the mattress, her face beside his face, and together, they tried to defeat this persistent silence.

"I thought of calling you," she said.

"You could have," Quentin said.

"I did look up your number."

"I couldn't find yours," he admitted.

"Oh, it's unpublished," she said. Was she going to give it to him? Maybe, but there was another practical matter. "We need a system. We can't keep washing clothes, hoping to cross paths."

Quentin's impression, based on very little, was that the professor didn't want the world to know about them.

"Yes, a system," he said. "Fine."

She pulled closer.

"Fine," was a good word. He repeated it.

"I'll call before I come here," she said.

"Here?"

"Would that be a problem?"

"No."

"Monday nights," she offered.

Quentin nodded, and then he asked, "Can I call you?"

She became guarded, just a little.

"No," she said. But that didn't set the right tone. "That wouldn't be any problem, normally. But there are complications."

Quentin imagined a husband, and that hypothesis was so reasonable that the imagined husband was accepted as fact—an older fellow, bald and bookish, carrying a soft, useless middle into his wife's bed. But Quentin didn't ask about husbands or forbidden phone calls. He didn't want to risk spoiling what this was: A healthy male doing what he was supposed to do, insuring that he was going to get laid.

The reading lamp was on again. Sandra's rump had vanished inside panties. Putting on glasses, she noticed a cardboard map covering the far corner of the bedroom floor. By all appearances, she was curious.

Quentin explained. College friends just had a baby daughter, and he was wandering through Treasure City, hunting for a gift. That's when he spotted the game box adorned with armored vehicles floundering in deep snow, handsome Western men shooting at vaguely human shapes marching along the edge of the world. *The Europa Campaign* was written in red. Blurbs promised a complex, historically accurate rendition of the World's War. But what sold him was a promise: Solitary play quality was deemed Very High.

He bought the game for himself, and for the baby, a wicker dreamcatcher.

The rigid cardboard map reached from the Rhine to the Tibetan Plateau, from Thule Sea to the Straits of Hormoz. Thirteen hundred years of war had been waged over this shifting boundary. Simple colors defined the very complicated terrain, rail lines and a hundred historic cities adding to the authenticity. Just punching out the brightly colored chits had taken an hour. Each chit represented some famous military unit. Blue Talons. Queen Anne's Faithful. The Fifth Tumen. The Big Red One. Entire evenings had been invested in a rulebook no less cumbersome than life. Then a few nights ago, Quentin finally rolled three dice to create a random number, launching a cardboard war that would take weeks to run its nonhistoric course.

"We could play," he suggested.

"Thank you, no," she said, setting down a Mongol tank army.

"Strip war games," he said, watching her breasts.

Her sternum deserved a thoughtful scratch. Then she slipped on her bra, asking, "Which side do you play?"

"Both."

"Emotionally, I mean."

"The West, probably."

She buttoned her blouse and touched his nose with just a fingertip, and he wondered what important thing she would say.

"Mondays," is what she decided on.

"Good," he said. And because that seemed inadequate, he added, "Great."

Quentin was nine when the young teacher steered her class through a civics lesson. What did everybody want to be when they grew up? A forest of eager arms rose high. Girls wanted to be doctors and business owners and maybe president, too. Boys were more focused on their military careers—those ten years of mandatory service, beginning on their eighteenth birthday. Some dreamed of being pilots, others to be

stationed onboard famous warships. But a couple of boys in back were ready for the Marines. Marines, they knew, were elite soldiers who conquered islands and didn't back down from any fight.

Inside all that martial noise, one boy said nothing.

The teacher asked Quentin what kind of soldier he would be.

"None," he said.

That deserved a puzzled moment.

Then a classmate, knowing the story, called out, "Quentin's the Son-of-a-Hero. He never has to be a soldier."

The teacher was a Pawnee woman with big wonderful eyes, and her lovely mouth widened while the eyes grew even bigger.

"Your father is a Hero?" she asked, thoroughly impressed.

Quentin nodded, and the world around him noticeably warmed.

Intercourse wasn't permitted. That was Quentin's rule through college. He didn't want mistakes, and he didn't want to give girls the chance to cheat—a reason left unmentioned. Yet not only did Sandra agree to the prohibition, she seemed to relish everything else that was possible.

But even young men and needy women had limits.

Even if they wanted, it was impossible to do nothing but have sex and then part ways. So the lovers found comfortable subjects. Rituals were built, fine pleasures cultivated, and sometimes—more than sometimes—both of them took pleasure from what was being said.

"What did you study?"

"Study?"

"For your thesis."

The smile was sly, girlish. "Greek men."

Quentin laughed, hiding the squirm.

His lover sat up in bed. A hard north wind was trying to destroy the adjacent window. Both of them listened to the panes shaking, and then she offered a few senseless words.

"Greek," he guessed.

"Byzantine Greek," she said.

"Okay."

"Marian IX," she said.

"One of the Deiparas?"

"They were called the Theotokos. In the Orthodox East."

"Should I know her?"

"You should but you don't."

Quentin lifted his hand, pretending to hold a pen at the ready.

She laughed, just a little. "Marian IX led the Orthodox Church for six years and six months before she died. Of cholera, we believe."

"She was your thesis?"

"Her foreign policies were. Particularly her balancing act between the Latins in the West and the Maimun kingdoms in Asia. But even that narrow topic held too much ore for me."

The pen joke was stale. His hand dropped.

"Scholars will swear: Marian IX achieved nothing. No bulls of note. No recorded incident where she tested the power of her male ministers. She might have been the Christ's representative, at least over the Byzantine world, but she rarely traveled and wrote little and left behind the absolute minimum of history."

"Well. That lady does sound fascinating."

"Except," said Sandra. "Doing nothing is incredibly difficult."

A doubtful noise leaked out of him.

"Quentin," she said. "Hold your life exactly where it is now. Nothing about you and yours can change. You'll always have the same friends, the same routines. You'll never move to another apartment or alter your beliefs, find a new job or new lovers. How easy would that be? Not very. And now imagine that same trick applied to Constantinople and its enormous wealth. Retain all of your far-flung holdings. Your enemies remain your enemies, yet you never enter into open war. And meanwhile your fragile alliance with Rome and the Latin Deipara can be burnished but never altered. Six and a half years, and nothing becomes new in your very complex world. For any leader, wouldn't that be a wonderful accomplishment?"

Quentin narrowed his gaze, saying, "Six and a half years."

Sandra heard implications that he never intended.

After a moment's consideration, she kissed his cheek and then warned him, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, shall we?"

Quentin was reading about dirt. Specifically, a peculiar and very old layer of shocked quartz and ash that was scattered across the world. Mongolian researchers found the anomaly years ago, but it wasn't until an Iberian paleontologist made the same discovery that the Asians revealed their secret data. A single catastrophic firestorm had engulfed the earth, and the dirt's elemental makeup wasn't only peculiar, it was meaningfully peculiar: An abundance of rare-earths, including iridium, revealing the presence of a large asteroid or comet that attacked the helpless world.

Below the iridium, thunderbirds ruled.

And above lay nothing but furry lactating queens.

"When I was a girl," she began.

And she hesitated, smiling at some cherished memory.

A single hard click sounded, hot water flowing through pipes and the iron radiator.

"Venus was alive," Sandra said. "Smart well-read people were certain that it was a warmer, wetter earth. I never read the fantastic fictions, but the ideas were floating free, and I spent quite a lot of time dreaming about life on that sister world."

"What did the dreams show you?"

"Nothing interesting," she stated, with conviction. "I wasn't an imaginative nine-year-old. But the World's War had just finished, and I pictured a tropical realm full of dark naked people who were happier and quite a lot nicer than we are."

"That was 1948," Quentin thought.

"The War killed my father," she said.

She hadn't mentioned that before.

"On my Venus," she said, "little girls don't lose fathers to bombs."

"So you were thirteen when the Mongolian probe flew past Venus," he said, proving that he was paying attention. "No jungles found. Just one enormous oven and clouds of sulfuric acid."

She moved over him, saying, "Mars could be alive, I hear. Even if it's just bacteria."

Quentin queued up a few smart words about the manly Mongolians riding in their rocket ship.

But she spoke first, saying, "I don't want another world contaminated."

"I doubt our bacteria would survive there," he said.

She eased away.

"Quentin," she said. "I'm not worried about little bugs."

* * *

The physics department's library subscribed to odd journals built from interesting, marginally comprehensible articles. There were also copies of famous papers by Bernice Easy and Ras Gobena and Katherine Tan, and honored nineteenth century textbooks, and at the back of the room stood a special bookcase, locked and unavailable to students and vagrants alike. Staring through the armored glass, Quentin read the most dangerous words. "Tritium" and "Uranium." "Fission" and "Fusion."

"What are you doing?" a man snapped.

For an instant, Quentin pictured the inside of a cold prison cell.

But it was just Dr. Kale. A stocky, white-haired gentleman, Kale was an incorrigible smiler and natural jokester, and he was also the mind and heart of Warner physics. Undergraduates didn't usually get attention from researchers with his credentials. Informed rumor claimed that during the War, while great armies marched back and forth across Asia, this man sat beside a reactor in the Navajo Nation, playing some pivotal role building the West's first multi-kiloton bomb.

"Maurus, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"We haven't seen you here in awhile."

"I graduated."

"Yet I remember you. That's unusual." Blue eyes narrowed. "Still interested in the futurist fictions?"

"Sometimes."

"Researching nuclear fire, are you?"

"No, sir."

"Well, there's nothing behind those titles anyway. Introductory noise with a few wrong turns about isotope synthesis and chain reactions."

"Wrong turns?"

"Creative miscues. Words meant to confound our nonexistent enemies."

Quentin nodded carefully.

"So what's your interest today?"

Needing an answer, he said, "Artificial minds."

"Ah. Magic." Kale studied the young man. Maybe he liked what he remembered, but more likely, his mood had no relationship with this former biology student. Whatever his reason, the smile grew. "Do you want a glimpse of the future?"

"Always, sir. Yes."

Quentin's father was a Hero, and he was such an important Hero that the reasons for the medal and the honor remained obscure. But classmates and even adults often requested war stories from the Hero's son. Since Father shared almost nothing on the subject, Quentin had little to tell. He wasn't even sure where the medal was hiding inside his house. What Quentin knew was that his father served as a Marine in the Bellum Ocean. Just that fact was enough to make the other boys happy, and a lot of confident, speculative noise was offered about famous islands and obscure islands that were conquered by the vaunted Marines.

Quentin liked the attention well enough to let his friends say and believe and even defend whatever stories they wrote for themselves.

Of course very few citizens could be like Father, but many, many people were the opposite of Heroes.

One day, a new girl came to class. She lived with her aunt and walked to school alone and went home alone, and everybody thought they knew her story: Her parents had been imprisoned for treason. Except nobody could understand the crime because treason was wrapped in secrecy—trials and the subsequent convictions normally kept out of the news. Just knowing about treacherous acts was a criminal

offense, and that's why a ten-year-old boy didn't want to be anywhere near that silent, solitary girl.

Then there was a morning when the new girl didn't walk to school.

A full week passed without her sitting in class, and that's when someone started the rumor that her parents had been hanged for their crimes. It was a convincing story that patched over the questions and the gaps. Who knew what was real? But it turned out that the girl only had the varicella pox, and when her scabs were gone, she returned to school to discover that most people, even the teachers, believed the rumor. Her classmates watched her carefully, but a few girls did most of the teasing, particularly when tears erupted. And then the Pawnee teacher took the traitor's child by the arm and pulled her to the office, and the girl was sent back to the aunt as a disruption, and for the rest of the year, the varicella pox was called Traitor's Blight.

Kale led the ex-student out of the library, making one side trip through the physics lounge. A couple of deferment boys were reading journals while a chubby girl did some high-end calculus with a pencil stub. Then they went to the basement, to a facility finished only this year. Quentin's heart kicked. Looking back at him, the professor winked when he asked, "Are you going to steal any secrets?"

"Not today."

"Good answer."

An empty desk was set beside a heavy steel door.

The man's laugh turned caustic, shrill. "We're supposed to post a guard, but funding hasn't come through. It isn't cheap, finding someone with enough clearance to sit out here and see nothing."

Quentin nodded amiably.

"But that's how these things work. The rationality of our leaders continues to amaze me."

Kale turned a long key while punching eight numbers. Then he twisted the big nickel-plated handle, and the door swung inward, exposing a long bright room filled with noisy machines. At least three students had enough clearance to direct the computer's genius. Punch cards were flying, reels of magnetic tape were spinning, and a wind blew into Quentin's face—the breath of enormous air conditioners that still weren't powerful enough to chill that extraordinary machine.

Dr. Kale yelled out a name, asking, "Have you seen her?"

One man said, "She's in the lounge, doing her calc, sir."

"Thank you." The professor closed the door and secured it. "What do you think, Maurus?"

"It's louder than I imagined."

"And she's subject to breakdowns. And she's not particularly bright either." He led them back up the stairs, asking, "Have you heard of Grant's Principle?"

"Computer power doubles every . . ." Quentin hesitated.

"Three years."

"Yes. sir."

The man paused, suddenly whispering. "Why does it take so long, doubling the intelligence of a stupid mind?"

"I don't know. There's a lot of engineering problems to answer."

With a soft, disappointed voice, Kale asked, "But now which stupid mind am I talking about?"

Quentin took a deep breath.

And the old man turned and charged up the stairs, obviously wanting to be alone.

"Hello."

Quentin said, "Hello."

A small airy sound came into his ear, and then she said, "It's Sandra."

"Hello, Sandra."

She was a different person on the telephone. Her voice was faster, while copper and electrons made her younger, less certain.

"Are you ready for company?"

He said, "Yes."

"If not," she said.

"No. I want you."

Then she said nothing, and he saw a husband lurking.

Sandra said, "I'm leaving now," and hung up.

Sometimes the imaginary husband was old, bedridden, and mindless. But tonight he was fifty and alcoholic, and unapologetically violent. Quentin pictured a drunken bully chasing after his cheating bride, and the story unfolded in several directions. Quentin always playing the role of hero.

In a universe of endless invention, every shattered skull is inevitable.

Sandra's Theotokos, God-bearer to the Eastern Church, assumed her post ten days after her thirty-seventh birthday. Marian IX was a small, plain-faced woman and the titular head of a very profitable empire. She also served as the honorary admiral to the world's largest navy and the Holy Provider to a well-trained army based upon the armored cataphracts. In the final decade of the twelfth century, Byzantine holdings stretched from the Balkans to the northern fringe of the Sudan and west to the Ionian Sea and Libya, with the Holy Land and Anatolia, Syria, and a sliver of the Caucasus Mountains constituting the long, ever-shifting border with the Maimun world. But peace reigned during her time, the old enemies of Christianity more eager to wage war against one another than attack Europa or Egypt. What's more, there was meaningful trade between every portion of the known world, including a Western Empire enjoying a modest rebirth.

The Theotokos already had four children with various fathers. Her three daughters accepted landholdings and accomplished husbands, while her ten-year-old son was taught how to ride and fight.

Power and the Church's purse strings negated that plain face and the slender, almost boyish body, and Marian IX reveled in the endless choices available to her. Her own husband was elderly, possibly senile. But two youthful advisors often peeled away her official robes, and occasionally both entertained her at the same time.

"Jealous?" Quentin asked.

"Of so much," Sandra said.

"But was she really that powerful?"

Sandra rose up on an elbow, acquiring a purposeful height. "You think the Eastern Church was controlled by its male advisors, not the Theotokos."

"I've read that once or twice."

Sandra was happiest when she was the smartest person in bed. Facing just the right level of ignorance, she smiled, and then she looked across the room, admitting that yes, the predominantly male Council served as a powerful Senate, riding hard over the directions of government. And the Eastern Bishops, men as well as women, chose the Theotokos from among their less ambitious colleagues. But Quentin was falling for the old Roman half-truth. After the Great Schism in the 550s, the West embraced the useful myth that their God-bearers, the Latin Deipara, were superior to the flashy, hypocritical East. But of course the Roman West was a very different realm, poorer and far less educated. Its priesthood was mostly female, but that was because so many young women had lost their ancestral lands. Numbers didn't mean

sure power. Meanwhile in the East, free citizens enjoyed many more opportunities. There was stability and Law. A sixteen-year-old girl—the customary age of adulthood—wasn't likely to misplace her family wealth. And landless ladies didn't have to pledge their souls to the Church, free to become merchants and shop owners and bankers. Yes, women were scarcer in the Church hierarchy, and that's why men appeared to dominate. But while the Theotokos was many things, she was never the simple figurehead.

"Okay," he muttered.

"Testosterone," she said. "That's what ran the military and often set foreign policy. But Byzantine women always held title to the best lands. And only a woman could be heaven-touched—the face and voice that people worshipped long after the face and voice of their Christ had vanished from this corporeal world."

Quentin always tried to be the good student. But he couldn't shake the image of God's chosen representative on earth stripped nude, happily sandwiched between burly, sweat-greased boys.

"Equality," Sandra whispered.

"What's that?"

"When Marian IX was inside Sophia's Church in Constantinople, presiding over thousands of worshippers, there was equality between the sexes. Men had their realm, women another, but both sexes kneeled as equals, taking the flesh and blood of the Christ." She paused, eyes wandering into the bedroom's high corners. Then a quiet, dry, and enthralled voice said, "A rough balance existed in their world. The wealth and the possibilities were shared, and it would be hard to prove that any system as rich has ever come into this world again."

"What are you reading?"

He wasn't certain. Last week's issue of *Mammal* was opened on the tabletop. "An article," he managed.

The girl laughed at him. "I can see that."

Quentin was struggling with the girl's name. Emma, wasn't it? The pale tops of her breasts were distractions, offered to Quentin when she bent over to examine the title. It took him a moment to craft the rest of his answer. "It's about an extinct bear," he said. "From Asia, the Han Kingdom."

"A bear?"

"Except it ate bamboo. Nothing else."

She kept laughing. "That's not much of a bear."

He looked at the photograph of a white skull, winning back some of his poise.

"What did the bamboo-eater look like?"

"Black and white, according to the legend."

The girl settled on the adjacent chair. "I knew you'd be here," she remarked. "You're Quentin Maurus, right?"

"And you?"

"Emalee Notion," she said, offering a tiny hand.

Not Emma. He took hold of the warm fingers and palm, and she clapped her other hand on the back of his.

They let go of each other, and she asked, "Is it old?"

"What?"

"The bear." He had become a fountain of endless amusement. Giggling, she said, "It's some kind of fossil, right?"

"No, it vanished just a few centuries ago. Though there's hope that a few of them survive in remote valleys."

Feigning interest, Emalee smiled at the pages and then at him. "I knew you'd be here."

"Yeah?"

"I've seen you reading. You're awfully interested in science, aren't you?"

He started to answer.

But one hand grabbed at the journal, flipping over to the cover. "That's neat," she declared. "A magazine all about mammals, huh?"

"It is."

"Do you date much, Quentin?"

The girl had a fine face, her mouth thin and the brown hair long, brown eyes throwing light in every direction.

"What's much?" he asked.

She kept laughing, unable to stop.

He said, "Sure, I date."

She breathed and said, "Good. Let's go out."

He said, "Yes."

"Tonight," she said. "My treat."

It was Monday, late afternoon.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

In the spring of 1198, Marian IX was in her sixth year as God-bearer to the Eastern Empire. She would soon die, though there was no way to know that. As a young woman with several lovers and great authority, one of her duties was to meet emissaries from the far reaches of the world: Romans and Berbers, Franks and Saxons and Vikings, plus quite a few Maimuns who found their way to the courts of Constantinople. These weren't just the neighboring Persians and Arabs, but there were Indians and Turks and even Chinese diplomats and traders who crossed half of the world to kneel before her. In this mishmash of languages and conflicting customs, protocols held sway. Perhaps the Theotokos wished the entire world behaved with the same ceremonial poise that was demanded of her. But even this most powerful leader could barely nudge the actions of millions, and Marian IX's place was to make polite conversation, sign treaties and declarations, while keeping her state secure and enhancing the gold that passed through her empire—the wealthiest realm in that lost world.

One day, a bearded young man rode into the great city on a peculiarly small horse. From a region too distant and too thinly populated to seem real, the visitor spoke through a Turkish interpreter, describing oceans of grass and mountains like islands, bitter winters giving way to burning summers that killed every lesser man. And it was very much a man's world, he explained to the God-bearer. Although his people had always preferred primitive, timeless beliefs, they were now receiving the Word of the Maimun, and that Man Prophet was winning new converts every day.

Marian IX offered an eager defense of her Christian faith.

But the visitor brushed that tedious horseshit aside. A shaman among his people, he explained that he was blessed with the gift of vision, able to peer into the next day. And when the magic was strong, he could see much farther than tomorrow, which was why he came all this way to visit the God-bearer.

"Do you see something for me?" asked the little woman.

Without hesitation, the visitor said, "Death."

"That is everyone's fate," said the Theotokos. "But what do you see for the world?"

The shaman did not hesitate.

"In short order," he explained, "my people will unite and then claim China, followed by the rest of Asia."

The woman felt like laughing, but she refused the urge.

"The conquest of so much land will take more effort than simply riding from one end to the other, but our brother Believers are weak and divided. Like a herd of good beasts, the Maimuns will come to understand who leads, and then the Mongols and our allies will ride to this Greek city and breach these rock walls, catching the woman who sits where you sit today. A hundred soldiers will abuse her body, and she will die forsaking your Christ Lady, and we will enslave her priestesses, and we will make geldings of her soldiers and senators."

In a rare failure of decorum, the God-bearer laughed at the visitor. "And what happens after that?" she inquired.

The man squinted at the empty air.

"I see nothing else. But after you, what can stop us? The Latins are past their glory. Rome's children are a few rough nations that quarrel over dark forests growing thick where laws used to reign. The rest of Europa is sure to perish, and by then the entire world will be ours to hold as we wish."

Quentin fell silent.

"Did this really happen?" his date asked skeptically.

"A Frankish scholar might have fabricated the incident. Maybe ninety years after Marian IX died. The evidence isn't certain, but she had good reasons to scare her people, uniting them ready to fight the Mongols."

"Well, I'm glad she did that," Emalee said.

Quentin shrugged.

"You're not hungry."

He glanced at his half-eaten lamb. It was Monday and he wasn't where he should be, and the unexpected guilt was killing his appetite.

His date offered a theatrical shiver.

"Growing up Mongol," she said. "What a shitty, awful world that would be."

Six days later, a low-pressure center emerged from the Navajo Nation, cold and angry as it marched across the prairie, and the sweat of the Carib Sea was chilled and thrown down on the flat world. By Sunday night, the hard winter turned brutal. North and west windows shook in their frames. The only story on the news was the blizzard. Schools and businesses would remain closed tomorrow. Except for essential services, the government was surrendering. By morning, the dry white terror would be knee-deep, but that was only if the wind and snow quit. They wouldn't quit. Drifts would turn into hills, exposed flesh would freeze in an instant, and society would bend before shattering where it was weakest. With luck, a dystopian world would emerge, human flesh being the main commodity, and a man like Quentin, armed with courage and charm, could take charge of a group of young women with lovely cannibalistic mouths. Rising from disaster, his new nation would steal heavy clothes and burn neighborhoods for heat, slaughtering the weak as they fled south, always two steps ahead of the spreading glacier.

But alas, Monday brought nothing but the old world and one grand blizzard. Except for the howling majesty of the wind, silence reigned. The only visible traffic was a handful of heavy trucks shoving their way toward some critical destination. Quentin read and napped and then read again: He read about Mars and then the ecology of marshes, and he studied a long excruciating history of the Alamanni Wars—two hundred years of strife culminating in the extinction of an entire people. But the Alamanni deserved to die, claimed the author. They were religious maniacs and agents of chaos, and she applauded Rome for erasing that tribe of dangerous Germans in the beautiful green meadows of the Alps.

Dinner was reheated potatoes and goat. Quentin watched the news while he ate,

trying to understand the conundrum of Turkish politics, and it was easy to believe that this had been a miserably boring day.

Then the phone sang.

"I'm trapped inside my house," she began. "Are you trapped inside yours?"

Quentin peered out the window, asking, "Are you alone?"

And Sandra said, "Not if you come see me."

In his second year at Warner, Quentin took an informal writing course. The class shared an ancient table, discussing one another's pitiful work. Students were often girls, usually literature majors who could sound convincingly passionate about art forms they had no intentions of pursuing. The other male was a thirty-year-old ex-sailor who needed an audience for his drug-use-in-distant-ports scribblings. Quentin wrote exactly what he wanted to write. Some of his peers were hostile toward the futurist ramblings, or he pretended they were. "Otherness" was a blessing giving him an identity and a skeptical eye toward everything conventional.

The professor was an old poet—a white-haired lady named Jurger who came with lofty credentials and a gigantic mug of coffee. Tolerant of all genres or worn down by too many years teaching small talents, she proved to be a quiet, thoughtful presence, offering opinions that sounded important and huge observations that Quentin didn't notice until days or years had passed:

Producing a novel meant writing like hell and numbering the pages.

Whatever the venue, fiction or autobiography, it was best to let the story have its own say.

And imagination was a fine thing, as long as it was kept under control.

One day, between longs sips of bitter black coffee, Madam Jurger mentioned that experience only went so far. Living an entire life in the northern taiga didn't mean that a person could write convincingly about snow. But the average genius from the tropics, walking once through a blizzard, should be able to fill volumes with tales of High Thule adventure.

The address was buried in an unreachable pocket, along with a map cut from the telephone book. There were seven blocks to walk, mostly against the wind, but even when Quentin fell forward into a drift, he didn't worry about frostbite or death. His fear was focused on last Monday, his cheating waiting to be exposed.

Sandra's Trailbreaker was buried on the driveway. The house beyond was long and plain, one story tall with the porch light burning yellow, ready to fend off moths and mosquitoes. Quentin waded up the porch stairs and stomped his boots in the shin-deep snow. He had an excuse ready to explain last Monday, but if the lie didn't work, he was prepared to tell some flavor of the truth: He went to dinner with a boring girl. Quentin had an awful time. He didn't have sex, except afterward and alone. And he was sorry, sorry, sorry.

But neither lies nor excuses were necessary. Both front doors burst open with Sandra jumping back, shouting, "You made it."

He brought the storm inside with him.

Then the doors were shut, and she was a stranger spouting clichés about bravery and physical strength. "In this kind of weather, on this awful night." She took the hero's coat and face mask and the wet cold mittens, hanging them on an old wooden post beside her brown winter coat. She looked colder than Quentin felt, wearing nothing but a long plain shirt with huge brass buttons. Her hair was down and combed. Her breath smelled of mint. She was a different person, the voice louder, franker, and less polished, and she had never hugged him like this. Did he want

something hot to drink? But Quentin didn't answer in the next breath, and the question had never been. By the arm, he was ushered into her bedroom. Candles were burning. A radio was playing old music, the volume far louder than seemed natural. The bed was suitable for a married couple who didn't want to touch. Quentin stood at a respectful distance, studying the gigantic mattress and then the rest of the room.

Sandra came close, and her voice changed again. Whispering, she asked, "What's wrong?"

Quentin laughed and wished he hadn't. Then he made a confession that was more difficult than dinner with Emalee. "I keep thinking there's a husband somewhere."

She nearly laughed, but her voice remained serious. "Never one of those, no," she said.

Sure enough, nothing about the room felt masculine. No oversized socks lay forgotten in a corner, and only the near edge of the mattress had dipped, marking where a modest weight had been applied for years. The image of a lonely, middle-aged woman brought pity, and for no rational reason, Quentin grieved for the puffy man who never existed. And all that while, a pair of cool hands were running under his shirts and down the front of his trousers, the belt and snap and brass zipper handled with precision as this stranger prepared him for her pleasure.

Manners were important in the world, and he was the willing guest. Sandra was a surprisingly quiet lover inside her own home, even more so than at his apartment, and like always, she was precise about what she wanted. Her climax was quick and intense, and he wasn't close. He was too busy watching the show. Sandra was still wearing the shirt—to keep warm, he understood at last. But she had opened the top buttons in order to show him the small drooping breasts, and then he grunted and said, "There."

She put her face close to his, asking, "Better?"

"What?"

"Are you feeling better?"

He was ferociously warm, which was a huge improvement. But he also felt drained and useless. For the next five minutes and maybe for hours, he would be a sexless, pitiful creature.

"You thought I had a husband," she said, and now she laughed.

"Have you been married?"

She said, "No. Have you?"

Secrets were lurking.

"I risked my life walking here," Quentin said.

"You did."

"You have secrets," he said.

She didn't dispute him.

"So tell me something I don't know."

Sandra took a breath and held it deep. Then very quietly, she said, "Euphemia II was an effeminate man who dressed and acted like a woman."

"That was a Theotokes?"

"From 965 through 968. According to reliable texts, the truth was known to loyal sponsors who intended to keep their secret for decades, should the young man live long enough."

"But he died."

"A suicide. Or murder."

"Okay," he said, letting his dissatisfaction grow. "But you're not telling me something."

That earned a long, careful stare.

"What don't I know?"

Sandra sat up, one finger scratching her sternum. Then she refastened each of the big buttons and slid to the floor, putting on slippers long past their prime. Two steps, and she turned back to him, the same finger curling, inviting Quentin to follow.

A closed door waited at the end of the hallway, and beyond, a second bedroom. Its bed was long and narrow, the elderly mattress stripped of sheets and depressed in the center. The dresser was walnut, worn and looking handed down. Two dusty lacrosse sticks waited in a corner, and there were other embellishments that smacked of the male world. On the far wall was a photograph of the Acropolis, framed and in color but not recent and definitely not professional. Beside the door was a calendar from three years ago, from May, two dates wearing circles and words written inside each:

"Theodore's 18th B-day," he read silently.

"I have a son," Sandra whispered.

And two days before Theodore became a man, a mother's hand wrote in big letters, "T. defects."

Quentin was awake and maybe he never slept. He wasn't certain. Sandra had turned down the volume, but the radio was still fixed to the same strong station, and maybe that's why he was awake. Advertisements for funeral services and hemorrhoid creams led to a late-night voice hoping that everybody was warm, and then another old song tried to heat the world. The melody was familiar. A standard from the World's War, he couldn't remember ever listening to the lyrics, but every word seemed important tonight, if only because the smoky-voiced singer was long dead, and her noise about eternal love and devotion was ridiculous beyond measure.

The song ended with stringed instruments and the word, "Forever."

Quentin realized how stupid he was.

Sandra lay at the edge of the mattress. She slept until he tried to crawl past, and then her sleepy voice asked where he was going.

"To pee," he lied.

Clothes had to be gathered, keys kept quiet, and then because he was thinking about peeing, he had to go.

Sandra found him standing beside the toilet. She wore glasses and socks and nothing else. Staring at the ceiling, she waited, and then Quentin finished, pulling up his underwear before grabbing at the trousers, and she stepped forward and flushed, water rushing hard when she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Theodore," he said.

"Theo," she said, talking quickly. "I told you. He left before he was drafted."

But she had told him very little, as it happened. And after another round of sex, she fell asleep, or at least shut her eyes and laid still.

The flush was finishing.

Quentin said, "They're looking for him."

"Yes."

"He's running—"

"Yes." She put a finger on his mouth, and her naked body slipped past, dropping the seat before settling.

She peed, and he turned away, putting on the still damp trousers.

"Don't go," she said.

The wind had weakened, but not by much.

She wiped and stood and said, "Stay until morning," and then she flushed again.

Quentin turned to the small woman.

"The radio," he said.

She began to nod.

"Someone's listening to us," he said.

With every possible reaction before her, Sandra decided to laugh wearily, bare shoulders shrugging as she told her fearful lover, "Maybe they are. Really, I don't know what the Federals do."

"One draft dodger," he said.

A mother's pride showed. "An important dissident."

Quentin finished dressing.

"You can't leave. Not in this weather," she said.

Time was an illusion, and every life was a line drawn between adjacent, eternal images, and that's what Quentin was thinking, trying to decide what line to walk.

The toilet had stopped flowing.

One small hand grabbed him by an elbow.

Then Quentin began to talk, to shout, telling the ceiling and the entire house, "I'm leaving, I'm gone. Good-bye."

The map was paper, detailed and thoroughly researched yet cheaper to print than the stiff cardboard used in the Eastern Campaign. Its central fold was a stubborn ridge dividing Europa and North Africa from the vastness of Asia. But what if geology like this were possible—a mountain range running straight for thousands of miles, soaring above clouds and climate? Hard vacuum and the tilted terrain would have prevented armies and cultures from crossing sides. If there was an Alexander, he would have no choice but to march west. The Man Prophet, son of an Arab mother and Jewish father, would have been born on the wrong side of the divide, separated from Persia and that old empire that was waiting for rebirth. Two worlds would stand beneath the impossible mountain, and thousands of years would pass before either civilization would have so much as an inkling of its neighbor.

Quentin folded the map back on itself, removing the ridge.

This was the world thirteen centuries ago. But instead of pushing cardboard chits into battle, there would be thousands of filthy, furious men and a few famous women, plus slaves and girl whores and their male counterparts, swift horses to carry the best fighters and solid horses and mules toting inadequate supplies. Dust would matter, and the relentless, amoral weather. Personalities would play against one another, with tragic and humorous and often trivial consequences. The mastery of a single general might carry the day, or a bout of dysentery would negate his genius. Or fear, weightless and contagious, would ripple through a small infantry unit, triggering panic, and an army would lose its battle, and the other side would find a decisive, inexplicable victory.

The greatest story in history was about to repeat itself.

The dice were thrown, and the Prophet led his chits into Egypt and Anatolia. But the wellbeing of millions was at stake, as well as the shape of civilization for the next thirteen hundred years, and in this version of history, Europa endured the onslaught. Their armies not only won the war, but they annihilated the Maimuns. Then the surviving chits, heroes every one, returned home to fuck the grateful landowners and shopkeepers and scholars, making fine babies that grew up hearing tales of distant lands that they would never need to see for themselves.

The phone sang.

Short-short-short-long.

"Hello."

A woman was breathing, and then she stopped breathing.

Quentin knew who it was, but he asked anyway.

"It's me," she said.

He sighed.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He said, "I can't tonight."

That earned a moment of silence. "I didn't ask," she reprimanded. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry, I should have explained all of that before."

"Yes," Quentin agreed.

Sandra said nothing.

But if she had confessed, what would have been different?

"Of course you don't have to think about these matters," she said, her voice gaining velocity, heat. "You are blessed. You have a deferment. In your life, you've never had to contemplate hard choices."

"Do you think my phone's bugged?" he asked.

And he instantly imagined Federals listening to headphones.

"We're at war," she said. "We've been in this battle for thirteen hundred years, and of course everybody is being watched."

He felt exhausted, sick in his stomach.

"Quentin," she said. "What goddamn dream world do you live on?"

The laundry was transformed. The spring sun and melting snow flooded the windows with light. As a consequence, the little building felt tiny. Grime and dents begged to be noticed. Every mote of dust was fixed inside the dry hot air, and every client was a stranger, and everybody wore the worst kinds of clothes, some people looking drunk and everybody working slowly, nobody in any hurry to be anywhere else on a boring Sunday morning.

Quentin was reading an adventure novel from the thirties. The story was wrapped around a giant two-fingered thunderbird called Lucida's Terror, dead for sixty-six million years now. But a smart and lovely lady scientist found a nest of viable eggs, and what the eons couldn't hatch, she could. She raised the chicks on goat meat and then on evil men, and she trained them to be ridden, and now she was preparing to take her warriors into battle against the Mongolian mammoth corps.

An engine rumbled, and Quentin recognized the voice of a Trailbreaker.

Before looking up, he considered what he might do and might say in the next uncomfortable moments.

But the car was sky blue, not gold, and it was driven by a different middle-aged woman. She parked at the lot's far corner, got out and came around to help an elderly man from his seat. Maybe it was her husband, but there was enough resemblance to make him look like a father. In Quentin's head, that's what they were: Daughter and dad dressed in their Sunday best, stealing a parking spot before making the one-block walk to the Reformed Church and its late-morning service.

Once more, he reflexively searched the laundry for the face he knew.

Then he went back to the marching thunderbirds. The story was populated with characters as simple as the animals they rode, and unlike life, quite a lot happened, and unlike life, every twist to the plot was welcome.

Only part of the evening was spent wrestling with conversations that would never happen. Which was why this Monday happened to be better than last Monday.

In his head, he told Sandra, "You're too old for me."

Aloud, he said, "I'm wrong for you."

An epic fight was wrapped around the secret son pursued by government agencies. It wasn't fair to involve him, he argued. None of this was fair. Through no fault of his own, Quentin had been endangered. But the imaginary Sandra broke into

sobs, begging for small gestures of forgiveness and then large ones, and in the end, the daydreamer lost that fictional argument.

Standing beside the west window, Quentin watched the quiet street and green grass and the bright plastic eggs set in a ring on the neighbor's unmowed yard—cheap symbols of last week's spring equinox.

Evening never fell, he was thinking, and the sun never dropped.

Cliches claimed what they wanted, but darkness always emerged from the earth, out from its hidden corners and up from the world's countless holes—shadows given the necessary strength and courage to invade the abandoned, fear-struck air.

It was Saturday evening and Warner College was between quarters, yet quite a lot was moving on campus. Weaver finches pecked at seeds and each other. A male bloodbird sang from a tall branch. Glade squirrels ran and paused and ran again. But dominating the scene was a flock of Queensland ravens. They spoke among themselves, roosting in the trees while their siblings hopped about the lawn with impunity. The ravens were discussing the human interloper. Wise and rapacious, they debated how Quentin would taste and who deserved the choice bits, and that's why one of the ravens lingered in front of him, one smart and very cruel eye examining his reserves of fat.

A bad little story occurred to Quentin: Birds of every species banding together, rebelling against humanity.

The dirty gold Trailbreaker was parked in an otherwise empty faculty lot. Quentin didn't ask what he wanted, much less if he had a plan. He watched himself walk beneath the cow-itch vine that covered the front of Old Warner Hall. The righthand door was locked, but not its amiable partner on the left. The indoor air was cool, high ceilings and deep sandstone walls giving the building its familiar cave-like sensibility. Pausing, he heard nothing. The broad center staircase led upward, and having reached the second floor, habit or momentum carried him up narrow stairs to the third floor.

He wasn't welcome here. This was a muddy little mistake, he sensed. Then what might have been a voice found him—a muttered phrase, genderless and quickly lost—and he followed, pausing at the small board where a Novice would learn his professor's office number.

The voice came again. A man was speaking, hushed but emotional. If Sandra was here, she wasn't alone. She was probably entertaining another ex-student, Quentin decided, and he told himself to stop wasting steps, doing nothing for the moment but watching what happened inside his head.

Small endurable pains were a blessing, proving that he would survive this torment.

And with that, he took a small step backward.

"Yes, son. May I help you?"

The voice was firm and soothing, quiet yet pleasantly rich. The words arrived from no particular direction before ending inside his ears. In reflex, Quentin looked up, but no one happened to be floating near the ceiling. A slow turn ended when he saw the dark office door halfway opened, revealing a scholar's wall covered with shelves and tall books, and before the wall sat a wizened little fellow, reading glasses on his nose and drifts of snowy hair hovering over a pale pink scalp.

Perhaps the voice came from that man. But he said nothing more, and Quentin couldn't tell if his own presence had been noted. Sitting beside a small desk, wearing a neat dark suit with the cravat carefully pressed and tied, the old fellow had large eyes left half-closed and full pink lips clamped shut, and his head was tipped away, one skeletal hand holding some object against the unseen ear.

Quentin took a half step toward the man, remembering and then forgetting a name. Professor emeritus, the fellow hadn't taught a class in several years. But a name plate decorated the desk beside him. Dr. Julius Hedgewick. Of course. And in another moment Quentin was certain that he had known the name all along.

Dr. Hedgewick breathed and shook his head slowly, and the voice that Quentin heard before said, "Well, well." The hand was holding a bone-white earpiece, the braided cord leading to a small radio resting on the desk. With a sober smile, the man looked at Quentin, and once again, he said, "May I help you?"

"I was," Quentin began. But what was he doing? "Leaving. I took a wrong turn."

"But you're here now." The smile warmed, and with the other hand beckoned. "Come in. Join me, son."

Quentin stepped inside the office. The last of the day's sun was flooding through the tall rippled glass. Books numbered in the hundreds. Words had no weight, the old shelves bowing under the paper and glue. Quentin read titles and forgot what he read. The general focus was on pioneers and native tribes and the long, generally peaceful settlement of this territory. Hedgewick waited for his guest to sit. The second chair, wearing leather and wheels, looked as if it had been the professor's until it was worn out, relegated now to an honorary status.

"A lovely day," said Hedgewick.

Quentin nodded.

"The Han have an expression. 'May you live in boring times.'"

"This is a boring day," Quentin said.

"Which is reason enough to enjoy it."

It felt important to admit, "I never took any of your classes."

The confession went unnoticed. With a crooked finger, Hedgewick turned the dial on his portable radio, and with the click he said, "There. I'll save the battery."

"I wish I had taken something of yours," Quentin added.

The supplicant's noise was discounted with a shrug. Then those long hands joined together against his chest, and the old fellow said, "I'm writing a history about this school. Which has not always been this wonderfully boring."

Quentin was a student again, sitting in the front row.

"Warner College has seen some battles," Hedgewick continued. "I'm sure you know that this was a woman-only school until after the World's War."

"Yes, sir."

"But that's rather less than true. After the Garner Sect was destroyed, in October of 1875, school administrators decided to honor a few heroic soldiers." He paused, smiling wistfully. "Do you know what the Garners believed?"

"Communal property and freedom from government."

Hedgewick offered no clear reaction. After a moment, he said, "Well, that is the simple description. But no, it doesn't do justice to their radical ideas. God had chosen them, first of all. And God rules the universe in all of its facets. They took the idea of a sexless deity to its ultimate end, which meant that the Christ was neither female nor male, and from this peculiar notion came the principle of total equality between the sexes."

Quentin nodded, his rump settling into the seat.

"The Garners had settlements to the west and north, particularly in the Paha Sapa Mountains. Good at business, enriched by gold, they gained numbers and wealth, which they took as further evidence of their divine entitlement. Believing their own superiority, they let themselves move into full rebellion against the Lakota governor. This was early in 1874. Brigades of cavalry were marshaled and sent west, and there was a yearlong campaign before that awful little war was finished. The campaign ended with the slaughter of everyone but young children and the least guilty women. One victori-

ous brigade happened to pass through Eureka on their way home. A parade was arranged in haste. The veterans rode up the main street, and to reward our heroes, the Warner president agreed to invite ten young men—men of education and some promise—to become students in every sense but officially.

"Of course, the campus was quite a bit smaller. Warner Hall was the tallest structure, and as old as this room looks to you, it didn't exist then. The entire third floor was a single room, open and serving as the chapel for our pious students and their lady teachers. Several hundred young women were preparing for lives that would demand learning and a measure of wisdom. But these were young women subject to young tendencies. Sitting in the same classrooms with ex-soldiers proved too much of a temptation. Dozens fell in love, and the men adored the attention, and they acted exactly as young men will, and the situation might have remained bearable. But you see, one of the heroes was not. His true character remains a mystery. Who can know? He might have been insane before being sent west to kill heretics. Or the battles made him angry in deep, destructive ways. Or maybe one of the girls professed her love and used him, and then she cast him aside . . . making her wholly to blame for the breakdown in his soul and sanity.

"History is built on conundrums, not answers. Whatever the reason, that young fellow was filled with withering rage. He didn't just hate this one despicable girl, but all women and all that they stood for. One morning in 1877, while the entire campus was sitting upon this floor, enjoying chapel, the ex-soldier soaked a mattress with kerosene and dragged it into the basement beneath the only stairs, and then he set the mattress on fire. There it smoldered and flared before choking on its own black smoke. If it hadn't choked, the building would have burned. The stairs would have ignited and collapsed, and the trapped women would have had to leap three stories to the ground, and those that didn't die from the fall or smoke or flames would have been crippled. But thankfully, with God's blessing, the mattress failed in its mission, and the college survived that disaster, and of course the dangerous man was hunted down and executed, while his brothers were told that their presence was no longer welcome here."

For a moment, Hedgewick glanced at the hallway. Quentin barely noticed, leaning forward now, elbows on knees, waiting for whatever this sage said next.

"I have given that mattress quite a lot of thought." Eyes turned to the floor, picturing a rectangle of fabric and padding. "Instruments of mass murder aren't selected by chance. I wouldn't be surprised if that mattress had significance to his life and his sickness. Which is another example of our human tendency to let ourselves be wrapped inside our symbols, crippling our ability to act effectively in pursuit of our interests, whether they are worthy or disgusting."

Hedgewick's eyes looked up, looked at Quentin. "Passion can be dangerous. We know this too well. If you manage to reach my age, son, you may appreciate just how perilous human nature can be. Yet at the same time, it must be said that because passion is incoherent and clumsy, and it is inefficient on its most dangerous day, for those reasons we have been saved endless times. Yes, saved. Spared. Because if we were machines, machines blessed with rational, efficient mechanical minds, we would have met every enemy with perfect campaigns, and only the perfect few would survive. Or more likely, one machine would have prevailed, and where would be the success in that?"

The lecture was finished. The pause said so, and the way the professor leaned back in his groaning chair said so, and then the same crooked finger turned the dial on his little radio while he pushed the earpiece back where it belonged. Glancing at Quentin once more, joy buoyed the smile. "She's waiting for you, you know."

Quentin sat straight up in the chair.

Then the small hand dropped on his shoulder, and into his right ear, Sandra whispered, "There you are."

She claimed his hand when they reached the hallway and dropped it again once they were inside her office, and they stood a long step apart, staring at each other. Sandra's mouth was half open. She was breathing quickly, and the oyster glasses were dirty enough to show smudges, and she wasn't pretty. She looked tired and grimy, her hair matted by oil and crumbs clinging to the blue shirt and the thin makeup smeared above her red left eye. Her peculiarly intense gaze made Quentin expect that she was going to leap at him.

But whatever the urge, it suddenly left her. Pointing to a short sofa, she said, "Sit."

He sat. The room was smaller than her colleague's, the shelves fewer, but just as many volumes filled crevices and odd crannies. Her books were newer and brighter than Hedgewick's, yet the subjects were far more ancient. Papers and folders were stacked on the desk and two separate tables, and still more books were mixed into that purposeful mayhem. This was a busy library. Millions of words waited to be gathered inside the mind of a person, and that odd thought made Quentin happy, happy enough that he didn't have room to think anything else.

Sandra settled behind her desk.

"What are we doing?" he asked.

"I'm waiting," she announced.

He nodded.

She studied him, a half-smile tinged with caution.

"I wanted to tell you," Quentin began. "The other day, I read something interesting about Venus."

Her caution dissolved into a clear, urgent feeling. She said, "I just remembered."

"What?"

"Why I'm angry with you."

Quentin wanted to go outside and lie down. He wanted ravens to dig the eyes out of his skull.

Then a phone began to sing, four notes sounding, and after the pause, the notes began all over again. The telephone wasn't in Sandra's office, yet the woman seemed keenly interested. When the ringing stopped, she leaned forward with eyes opened and her top lip curled back over her hard little teeth.

Hedgewick had interrupted the melody. "Hello?" And then a moment later, "Hello there?"

Now Quentin was listening, as if nothing else in the world mattered.

"No, I'm sorry," the old man said. "You have a wrong number."

Sandra rose, calling out, "What number did they want?"

"Five-oh-five," the old professor answered.

She walked to the closest table. Behind a stack of books was a small white sack, and with a distracted air, she glanced at Quentin. Was he still here?

"I forgot to do something," she lied.

He nodded.

"An errand."

"Okay."

"You should go home," she said.

Quentin wanted her to come home with him, but honesty would reveal a sex-crazed monster and that is why he lied.

"I want to go with you," he told her.

She wouldn't let him. Quentin understood that.

Yet Sandra didn't let herself think, happiness making her unusually bold.

"All right then," she said quietly, surprising both of them. "Come meet my son."

The Trailbreaker coughed before finding its breath, and Sandra pulled onto the road, looking in every mirror as much as she looked ahead.

Little neighborhood roads took them north.

Quentin didn't ask for explanations or instructions. He turned in the seat, and life's only purpose was to watch what was behind them. The only trailing car was tiny and light blue—not the kind of vehicle he expected from the Federals. But just when the vehicle seemed to follow them too closely, it turned and vanished inside an open garage.

Quentin buried his questions. He was feverishly curious about Theo and his circumstances and how these occasional, apparently random meetings were organized. But he wanted to be a minion, and those duties included remaining usefully ignorant. Little dramas played out in his head, and they were just that: Play. The police were big men and acidic little women, and nobody could break him, and even if he was broken, he knew nothing nothing nothing that could injure anyone.

Then the daydream police started to beat him with lacrosse sticks, and he lost control of the daydream.

Quentin looked forward.

Sandra was just as silent and just as nervous as he was, but her nerves carried more anticipation than fear. She clung to the big steering wheel. Every purple stoplight was obeyed, every corner needed three looks. She crossed railroad tracks on a battered road and then slipped across Highway 7. A little car dealership passed by, and repair shops and warehouses, and then there was nothing but the asphalt road leading to hills and open countryside. Quentin assumed they were heading for farm country and an isolated field, but Sandra fooled at least one person. They crossed Wolf Woman Creek and then turned right and right again, using a rutted lane and a narrow, plainly substandard bridge to cross the water again.

"Did you see the flag?" she asked suddenly.

"What flag?"

"On the windshield. In the car lot on Bernice."

He hadn't.

"It was there," she assured. "And that's where Theodore is."

"Okay. Good."

She drove faster, laughing softly. "Maybe someday," she began, and then her mind shifted subjects.

"Someday what?"

"I'll teach students how to confound authority figures." She laughed and cuddled with the wheel. "Would you take a class like that?"

"From you."

"Theo and I have techniques, tricks. And they've worked for more than two years now."

Quentin was growing more uneasy than he was interested.

"I don't talk about my son at home."

"People are listening."

"I assume lurking ears, yes." She glanced at him, measuring his mood. "It's the same with phone calls, of course."

Quentin shifted in the old car seat. "What about this car?"

Sandra took her foot off the gas, letting the Trailbreaker roll up to the next unmarked intersection before turning right again. "There's a microphone in the dashboard and it's tied into the antenna, and no, I'm not worried. The bug was planted last year. I know when it happened and where, and I've rewired it. When my car

runs, the radio plays directly into the transmitter. Eavesdroppers have to endure songs that an old lady would love."

Quentin stared at the menacing dashboard.

"Do you know how many men evade the draft?" she asked.

"Not really."

"Nobody does. Different agencies, different calculations. Federal Intelligence has theirs, the public Freedom-Servers another. Strong Shores is supposed to have the most resources and make the best estimates, but their numbers are always inflated. It helps to scare the public, filling the hills with wild horny men who live off deer meat and their hatred of the government. Which feeds their budget, of course."

"What's your number?"

"One third of one percent," Sandra answered. "Those are the eligible draftees trying to evade service."

The long spring dusk was finished. They finally turned left, heading back into the city. But night had closed in behind them, and remembering his solemn duties, Quentin looked out the back window, nothing to see but smothering, impenetrable shadows.

"One third of one percent means too many bodies to chase," she allowed. "Plus there's a cost involved in finding every young man who refuses. Police time and court time. Cowardice isn't one of the movements that terrifies the government, so they let it continue without too much of a fight."

Piecing together the logic, he asked, "Is Theo a coward?"

Sandra shifted her body, and a tight voice said, "Dissent is a different crime."

Quentin regretted his words.

Quietly, with deep feeling, she said his name. Then she turned to look at him, waiting for his eyes to find her.

They were still moving, but nobody was looking forward.

"What?" he asked.

Sandra reached in the darkness, her arm too short to touch his leg.

"Dissent is the opposite of cowardice. Dissenters don't want big armies, and they're willing to risk everything to keep the world from being torched by tritium bombs."

Quentin could think of nothing worth saying.

And Sandra finally looked ahead, touching the brakes. A big lot filled with used cars and trucks was passing on the right, and she glanced down one row, tapping the brakes, and studied the parked cars. Then they began to accelerate, eyes forward, her rump squirming painfully.

"What?" Quentin asked.

She said nothing.

He started to look back.

"Don't," she warned.

They drove to the next light, waiting for the purple to change to gold, and she didn't say anything, pulling the white sack onto her lap, holding it and the secret gifts with one hand while her face looked sorrowful, unblinking eyes making tears.

The light changed.

She drove.

"What's wrong?"

"The flag's gone."

He stared at the dash.

"Theo saw something. He got worried." She tried to shrug, looking at Quentin, one hand high on the wheel while the voice struggled to remain strong. "He's careful and knows not to take chances. And this happens, sometimes."

Quentin said, "Good. That's he's careful."

She looked forward, at last. "Can I drop you at your house?"

He didn't answer.

She said his name again.

He whispered, "I've missed you."

Sandra heard him or she didn't. Either way, they continued south while she gasped softly, wiping her eyes with the sack, letting herself settle into a familiar gray pain.

They were watching the world, waiting to see if anyone out-of-place parked on her street.

"That happens?" Quentin asked.

"But they could be suspicious of my neighbors. How would I know?"

Sandra grabbed the mail from its blue box and unlocked the front door, and then they were inside, surrounded by electronic ears, by paranoia. A person had to be fiercely brave to push through this kind of life without collapsing. The house lights were left off. Heavy machinery rumbled outside, which seemed ominous, but it was just a moving van passing, oxen and a wagon logo painted on its long side. Sandra pulled open the curtains and stood at the window, and Quentin stood with her. She wasn't calm. It took work to keep her hands still. But no strangers were lurking, and then just as she began to step back, a single sedan roared into view, highway headlights blazing. Quentin had never seen any car drive so fast on a residential street. Someone was terrified or crazy or drunk, but before the shock struck either of them, the car was gone.

Assuming someone was chasing the driver, they waited a little longer. But no second vehicle appeared, and this was another one of those minor mysteries that life collected day by day until its end.

"I need to wash up," Sandra said.

They leaned toward each other.

"And I'm hungry," she said.

Quentin realized he was famished.

Sandra went into the kitchen. Accustomed to a boy's appetite, she made three breadwraps with ghee and cold quail and peppers, the smallest of the wraps reserved for her. Then they sat on the sofa, eating while watching the empty street.

"Oh, I forgot," she said. "Venus. You were going to tell me—"

"It may have life," Quentin said. "Last year, the Europan Space Administration dropped in their probe, but they announced the results this week. On its way through the upper atmosphere, where the pressure and temperatures resemble those on earth, the sensors found an abundance of bacteria-sized particles."

"Interesting," she said.

Then he said, "But there isn't any water in those clouds, just sulfuric acid, and the air is drenched with UV light. . . ."

"And the Mongols are landing on Mars," she pointed out.

He didn't understand.

"This a wonderful time to find life somewhere else," she said.

The West was stealing the East's lightning.

Sandra put her plate aside and stood. Then with a practical tone, she said, "Let's share the bath."

"All right."

The bathroom was smaller than he remembered, and stale, and the running water made the air dense. They lit candles, one fat vanilla-scented candle on the tank beside the toilet. The water wasn't as warm as Sandra wanted, and shaking her wet hand, she choked the cold tap back and then began to undress.

Side by side and with barely a glance at the other, they pulled off clothes, forming a common pile. Then she climbed into the warmish water, looking at his face and penis and his face again. She smiled fondly, if not happily. He climbed in behind her. Inside the porcelain tub, she wasn't tiny, and Quentin became a long strapping man with too much leg and arm. She left the water running slowly, making noise. The soap was a hard small bar with the dark ripples that come when soap is old and well used. She handed him a washrag. He rolled the soap and rag between his hands until he had suds and washed her stomach and breasts and her back and the back of her neck, and then he washed his stomach and face and crotch and the calves of each leg. She worked on her own face and released the excess water, and he clumsily reached around his back, cleaning what he could, unable to reach where his rump pressed against the cool white porcelain.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"Mind what?"

"If I go potty now. I really have to."

"Go on," he said, thinking that seemed polite.

She lifted the lid and sat and the bowl sang as the urine danced, and she watched him by candlelight, embarrassment emerging briefly and then vanishing. The sudden bright fart surprised both of them. She laughed and said, "Sorry," and Quentin laughed louder than she did, trying and trying to remember any moment in his life where he had been this happy.

Marcus Julius Constantius was the only child of a noblewoman named Sophia and a Roman general named Aurelius. A bright boy but physically weak and unimpressive, his lack of visible attributes helped him garner power. No one in the Emperor's court looked on him as a threat, and it wasn't until the civil war of 290 to 293 that his skills as a politician and tactician became known. In 295, the young general led his legions to put down the rebellion in Jerusalem, and that was the moment and the place when Constantine first came into intimate contact with the Christian church.

No conversion is simple. The man supposedly dreamt of a fiery cross descending from Heaven, but Romans were passionate believers in signs of every sort, and Constantine surely had other dreams that meant as much when he woke. But Christians weren't dreams, and they became helpful allies in his fight against Jewish rebels. Intellectual and philosophical reasons helped the transformation, and after more than two centuries of quiet growth, the Woman's Faith had spread throughout the Empire's educated women, growing familiar and relatively benign.

Sophia was as politically astute as her son, believing in power and poise, and in opportunities taken when the moment was ripe. Officially, she didn't convert until 299. By then her son had crushed Maximus and his band of thugs, gaining a stranglehold on the emperor's seat. That mother and son union lasted another twenty years, and after her death Constantine reigned alone for another two decades.

The dutiful son had promised to found a new capital in his mother's name. But every man is more than any woman's dutiful son. Sophia died, and that pledge was broken, replaced by a great cathedral erected in the center of Constantine's city.

One evening, the middle-aged emperor climbed to the highest portion of the church, accompanied by members of his court. Gazing across the metropolis, Constantine mentioned that he envied nothing but eagles, but against expectations, he didn't want their strong wings or their magnificent, soul-stirring beauty. What he wished for was their perfect vision, and turning to the Theotokos, he wondered aloud if some magic or perhaps a Christian prayer would bestow such eyes on a human skull.

Endless moments mark the change of the world, and this was one of the most important of all.

Rachel I was the Theotokos. A stubborn woman long before winning her office, she shook her head at the emperor's selfish request, and with a dismissive voice said, "But you would not want such a gift, sire."

"And why not?" Constantine demanded.

"Because perfect eyes would flood your soul with too much." The most powerful woman in the world was laughing at the most powerful man, warning him, "You would be bewildered by all that you saw. The vision of God would bring the worst kind of blindness."

Quentin wasn't sleeping.

Location and circumstances didn't exist. He was sitting up in bed, and it seemed to be his bed inside his own unlit apartment, but numb from sleep, he possessed no history that would explain any of this.

The smallest unit of existence, devoid of time.

Freedom.

And then the telephone screamed its melody for a second time, or a third or thirteenth time. This was his apartment, and he had been sleeping. And then he wasn't. Bare feet put themselves on the carpeted floor, and standing was reflexive, graceful and sudden just like the three steps that took him to the box singing on the wall.

"Hello."

He said the word, and before anyone could answer, he said it again.

"Hello?"

By then his heart rate had soared and the next breath made him ready to dive deep underwater. Scratching for explanations, he decided that his grandmother had died. This was an emergency call in the middle of the night, and so certain was he that he heard his mother's voice in the background, not quiet but softened by distance.

The woman screamed, "No. No."

Then there was a click, and silence.

Quentin's legs sagged and recovered, and he stood in the dark air of that silent house, listening to the air rushing from his suddenly aching chest.

The watery sounds of the dial tone returned.

He hung the receiver back on its plastic box.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he tried to place the voice and couldn't. But he was certain that it wasn't his mother's voice, or his grandmother's, and he was nearly as sure that he didn't know the woman at all.

A drunken wrong number; that was the best story.

Quentin looked at the hands of his clock. Monday had arrived, and he needed to sleep. Head on his pillow, his eyes closed and his body quit moving, but nothing else about him was sleepy.

Quentin held that pose for an immeasurably long while, eyes sealed while he watched his thoughts flow.

The family looked splendid in their own home. Mother was some kind of beauty with milk-heavy breasts and the baby boy on her hip, while Father was a portrait of dignity, confident and steady with more than a touch of nobility. Of course he wore nothing but a penis. What else did any good man need to wear? He was photographed strolling along a jungle trail on The Island of Flowers, and turning the page, Quentin found the photographer's hand laid against the same trail, her fingers and thumb giving proportions to those tiny footprints.

Monday night.

Girls at the next table were pretending to study. One girl said that her government class was canceled. What luck.

Quentin heard the words but didn't notice them. Glancing at his watch, he closed the magazine and put it under his shirt. He was never this impulsive. But borrowing wasn't stealing, he thought, walking slowly out of the library and then picking up the pace as he crossed campus. Leaving his apartment door unlocked, he undressed and sat on his bed, legs crossed and the borrowed magazine opened in his naked lap. He intended to finish the article about the Ebu gogo before Sandra arrived. The wildest islands in the Spice Archipelago were inhabited by this little species of humanity. The Ebu gogo had a simple language and perfect little stone tools as well as a lean culture that could be carried everywhere. Quentin went as far as trying a few of those sharp words in his own mouth. And then he realized that Sandra was late.

She was never late.

He counted each of the next twenty minutes before calling her at home. When the phone was in his hand, he expected her to answer. Once he hung up, he assured himself that he never expected to hear her voice, because she was on her way.

He dressed again, sitting close to the window.

Night came from its hiding places.

No Trailbreaker appeared.

Twice more, he called her home. Then he drove past her house, parking on the street and walking back. The neighborhood was calm. Her car was hiding inside the garage, or it was gone. But the living room lamp was burning. Some little moth, dense and busy, was trying to fly out of Quentin's mouth. He felt uneasy, except he also felt happy and hopeful too, giving the doorbell a long push, convinced that someone was coming. Hope rose higher, and he rang the bell again, a gambler's confidence taking hold. But the knob didn't move. Nobody was home. And that's when he thought to look inside the mailbox, discovering bills and the same colorful ads that he'd received today.

Every parked car needed to be studied, shadows and street lights filling them with lurking figures.

The urge to run was defeated by the fear of being noticed. Quentin walked back to his car, starting it and breathing, then driving past the empty teacher's lot, and past the grocery and the laundry, never finding the Trailbreaker. Then he pulled up in front of his house, parked and sat with the other shadows, the steering wheel in both hands as he watched his empty bedroom window, trying to piece together any comforting story.

By Thursday, the laundry had to be done. Inside the shoes, bare feet. Under the trousers, an old swimsuit meant for a smaller waist. Four washers were churning, which was a personal record, and Quentin sat on one plastic chair until he remembered its significance, moving to a chair that he had never used, pretending to read a Johnsgal novel when he wasn't looking at every new customer who came through the door.

A soldier entered, a Marine gunner with a small white duffel on his shoulder. The uniform was crisp, the beard trimmed military close, and when the man looked his way, Quentin dropped his eyes.

Even when he stared at the floor, Quentin saw the soldier. Somehow he knew that face. Age and whiskers had resculpted the features, and chemicals had lightened and reddened his formerly black hair. But the eyes were his mother's eyes, and he rocked like Sandra rocked side to side, pushing civilian clothes into an unclaimed washer.

Quentin stood, lifting one of his washing-machine lids.

Quietly, in a near-whisper, Theo asked, "Where is she?"

"I don't know." The lid fell from his hands with a crash.

The two young men sat together. The one who wasn't being chased was nervous, every new noise making him jump. The other man, the fugitive, seemed focused but comfortable. Maybe the uniform gave him courage.

Theo studied Quentin before asking, "When did you see her last?"

"Saturday night."

Theo nodded.

"Sunday morning," Quentin added.

"And since?"

He described Monday, minus the nudity. And he admitted to visiting his mother's house every night but tonight, although last night he didn't park and step up on the porch. His account had more details than necessary, but after a childhood spent listening to a natural lecturer, Theodore let his companion chatter.

Suspicion crept into his mother's eyes.

"You think I had something to do with this," Quentin guessed.

"Did you?"

"No."

Theo waited a moment. "Well, good," he said.

But the verdict had its effect. Quentin felt like a liar, an undiluted idiot. Something that he had said or done led to this mess. Unless it was some matter that he neglected. Heart thudding, hands shoved into his armpits, he wanted to say, "No," again, just to test this self-accusing intuition. He wanted to hear if his liar's voice would break. But his companion had made his own decision about guilt, and with a shy little smile, Theo said, "I know you didn't. How could you?"

Quentin dropped his hands, flexing them. Almost too softly to be heard, he said, "They took her."

Theo nodded. "Federals, probably."

"Because they want you," Quentin assumed.

Theo glanced at the rest of the room. Then with a stern voice—and not a quiet voice—he said, "Federals don't fuck with little runaways."

Quentin stared at places that were simple, the faceless washers and the grimy floor, fighting to clear his thoughts.

"She trusts you," Theo said.

"What?"

Theo showed him a half-sheet of paper covered with nonsense. "The code's based on Byzantine Greek," said Theo. "This is your address, your phone number. And the other places you might be found. It's not much of a code, I know. But it's enough to baffle most of the government idiots."

"She gave you my whereabouts."

"For emergencies."

All the ways in the world to feel loved, and this one left Quentin weepy. He sobbed and didn't care that he was sobbing, and Theo watched the show, feeling sorry for both of them. Then looking away, he admitted, "I don't know what to do."

Quentin handed back the paper. "Why did they take your mother?"

"They suspect," said her son.

"Suspect what?"

"She's an important dissident."

"Dissident," Quentin repeated.

"There's a group of anti-war, open-border idiots who want a permanent peace with the East. She belongs to them."

This wasn't about her son; it was Sandra. That's why her house and her car were bugged. How many more revelations did this woman have for him?

"Is she important?" Quentin asked.

Theo squinted. "Why the fuck would anyone tell me? If I got picked up, everything would be compromised."

Quentin nodded.

A long white car pulled into the laundry's parking lot, slowing but never stopping, calmly rolling out the other end.

Neither man spoke.

Then Theo said, "This could be a fishing trip."

"What?"

"The assholes do that sometimes. They grab somebody who might be powerful, just to see who jumps and who hides."

Quentin's washers were spinning down.

Then the soldier who wasn't a soldier bent low, holding his guts with both hands. After a few words in Greek, he said, "'The world has one purpose, one guiding principle that rules all of us.'"

Quentin nodded politely.

"Marian IX said that."

Quentin wanted to ask what that principle was. But the white car was mysteriously passing through the parking lot again.

Seeing it, Theo jumped to his feet. "Good to meet you, Quentin Maurus. And here's hoping we'll see each other in better days."

The uniform and man turned toward the nearest door.

"Your laundry," Quentin blurted.

"Not mine," said the traitor, out the door and inside the car, and moments later, he never was.

Nothing physical ever happened between Quentin and Madam Dobs. But they were connected with emotion, a vivid, almost visible bond. The boy had feelings that only grew during the next years, while the woman was embarrassed or disappointed in herself or maybe disgusted, forced to endure the stares of a smitten lad who would think about her at night, lying in bed, making ready for sleep.

Eventually Madam Dobs found a genuine man, a veteran who had served his ten years on the Armistice Line near Persia. From the first day, the neighborhood didn't approve of the newcomer. Quentin's parents declared him "bad news" and "borderline," and they warned their son to keep his distance. The ex-soldier was skinny and homely, and he sat on the porch day and night, smoking cannabis when he wasn't drinking hard wines. But there were bouts of discipline when the lawn was mowed, and the ex-soldier managed to paint the front of the house, out where the world could see his good work.

The man on the porch made a habit of staring down the neighbor boy.

They were rivals, Quentin assumed. Madam Dobs had revealed her affections, or the man shrewdly read the boy's thoughts. Either way, they were enamored with the same woman, and at some future point, for all of the best reasons, they would have to fight to settle the matter.

One night, Madam Bernstein called the police. There was a loud fight inside the Dobs' house, and sirens made it safe for the neighborhood to come outside to watch. A pair of police officers dragged the veteran out onto the freshly cut grass, the male officer holding the prisoner down while his partner used her nightstick. By then, everybody was standing in the street. Madam Dobs stepped out onto her porch. Blood was streaming down her face, but she didn't care. She was furious and sad for a lot of reasons beyond one man, sometimes cursing at the figure unconscious on the lawn, and sometimes begging him for a second chance, please, please.

Soon after that evening, Madam Dobs became a dyke, wearing steel rings on her girl-happy fingers. Adults believed that was smart of her, and inevitable. But for Quentin, there was a keen sense of loss made worse by the habit of passion: Honor-

able men protected women from the evil men. That was the basis of civilization, and that was the one good story running through every history of the world.

Quentin woke early Friday morning, watching the clock while dressing in presentable clothes. Then at the earliest possible moment, he called the factory to explain that he had stomach troubles and was going to miss work.

Campus was a different world during the week. Students were abundant and busy, and he had never felt more out of place. Every woman looked like a child pretending to be an adult. Most of the men were still far older than Quentin, and maybe they didn't remember him, or maybe they did. Either way, he endured stares from the bearded, often balding students with their unit tattoos and earrings and those hard attitudes acquired from serving a full decade in some vital, potentially horrific venture.

Dr. West's office door was closed and locked, and someone had taken the trouble to remove her Office Hours sign.

Dr. Hedgewick was sitting where Quentin had left him. Staring at his visitor for a long moment, the old man sorted through a lifetime of changing faces and unremarkable names, and then he brightened, glad to have staved off senility once again.

"Yes, Mr. Maurus," he said.

Then the professor realized why the young fellow was standing in his office door.

"I was wondering," Quentin began.

"I have nothing to tell you," Hedgewick interrupted.

"Have you heard from her?"

"No." The face reddened, with anger or embarrassment. "Why would I hear from anyone? I know nothing."

Quentin flexed his hands, shook his head.

"Anyway, this is probably just a routine event," Hedgewick continued. "These things will happen. There is nothing to be done."

"Nothing?"

One long hand swept aside doubts. "I was aware of her son's story, and Sandra occasionally mentioned politics. But my first concern—I warned her about this—was that she is not a strong person. Not like some women are. And by 'weak,' I mean the frailties and flaws that your enemies will single out, like the wolf taking the slow and the foolish."

"Shut up," Quentin insisted.

The old face became redder. A wet breath was held and then released, and then Hedgewick pointed out, "You're still free, I see."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Exactly."

Quentin flexed his hands again. Then he said, "Oh. You think . . ."

"I know nothing," Hedgewick said.

"Well then," Quentin said. "It's a good thing I never took your classes."

The desk was exactly as he remembered it, including the clipboard on top and the empty chair behind.

Quentin claimed the chair for himself.

Sitting made him feel exhausted. He had no plan save to wait until chance intervened, and chance came in the form of the heavy young woman who had been sitting in the lounge some weeks ago, doing her calculus. She didn't remember his face. Smiling nervously, she asked, "Did we get our promised guard?"

"Sign in," Quentin said, pushing the clipboard and pen at her.

She accepted him in an instant; it was as if he had always been here.

"And do me a favor," Quentin said, watching her working with the lock. "If he's there, tell Dr. Kale that I need to speak with him."

"Yes, sir."

She entered, and the warm air blew out from the computer room. The steel door didn't have time to shut. The white-haired professor emerged, finding Mr. Maurus sitting where he didn't belong.

"I'm rather busy," Kale snapped.

"You have a colleague in jail, or someplace worse," Quentin said.

"And who's that?"

"Dr. West."

He nodded. "The government professor . . ."

"Sandra."

Curiosity ran through the face, and recognition, and a measure of caution.

"Do you know what your students say about you?" Quentin asked. "You were important once and maybe still are, and that's why you get by saying things and doing things that nobody else can. You don't like the government. You despise its policies and the people in charge, and you're not shy about these feelings."

Unimpressed, Kale shrugged.

"Nobody else talks about our leaders being stupid, steered by fear. And people like you don't get old without having benefactors. That's why I think you have friends, friends who hold their own power."

"What do you want from me?"

"Call some friend. As a personal favor, ask for Dr. West to be released."

The man put on an ugly expression. "And why would I?"

One vivid answer presented itself. Because Theodore West was an angry and dangerous young man, and with a few careful words from Quentin, he might get the impression that Dr. Kale had turned in his mother.

That threat was ready to be used.

Yet in the end, Quentin stood and straightened the clipboard—his last official act as a security guard. Then he looked at the physicist, saying, "Because that's the only right thing to do."

The remainder of the morning was invested at the campus library. Concentration came and went, but he had nowhere else to go. There was a long profile about the heroic Mongolians and Persians onboard the Mars mission. Giant hominids might be living in the Himalayas, just like they might be living in western Queensland, and there was a rumor that deep diving submersibles were finding undersea forests made of giant pink worms. Meanwhile the Queensland moon base was erecting a supercooled telescope that would peer back to the beginnings of time.

Except there was no such bird as time.

Quentin abandoned the library's calm. The day had turned sultry, a dangerous wind pushing him home. Breadwrap and last year's apple became lunch, and obeying his earlier fib, his stomach began having troubles that lasted until evening.

Evening brought storms and a premature night. The telephone had remained silent all day, but he called Sandra's house every hour on the hour. Then a prophetic feeling began to build, and after the final trip to the toilet, Quentin drove through rain and wind. Sure enough, Sandra's drapes had been pulled open, every interior light burning. There wasn't a brighter, happier house on the street, and he parked in the drive and ran to the porch, hitting the storm door with one hand and the inner door with both. A slip of folded paper was stuck between the door and jamb. He tore the note when he unfolded it, and with rain crashing down, he assembled the halves, reading her name

first and then the neat letters above. "Your home." And then again, just to be sure, he reread, "Sandra."

No other car was parked on Quentin's street. Except for the hallway light, his house was dark. He ran upstairs, but nobody was waiting on the landing. In just these last minutes, his apartment had acquired a stale, lonely odor, and with lights off, he toured the empty rooms before returning to the landing, hunting for a second note that wasn't there. Rain was battering at the roof. Anger helped him feel alert. Sandra was meeting some other lover at his house. With that sharp thought inside him, Quentin went downstairs, looking through the door and the rain as the Trailbreaker pulled up.

The driver turned off the engine and climbed out. In the streetlights and the rain, she wasn't Sandra. Quentin stepped outside, recognizing the shirt and the old glasses, but the face was different, wearing a vivid purple bruise, and her posture had been transformed. She was inconsequentially tiny. She stared at him as if deeply embarrassed. Nothing about the lady was glad. She was between the car and its open door, and then Quentin was beside her and the strength left her legs. She dropped to the driver's seat. One long sound leaked out, and she looked at his face and his feet and smiled and then gave up smiling. Breathing meant work. Sandra made herself breathe, and then into the storm, with emotion, she shouted, "We need to be safe."

Quentin climbed in next to the driver. She rattled the keys in the ignition and then dropped her hand, looking at him. The big car shook as the wind gusted. She stared at Quentin until he asked, "What?" and then her face turned forward, hands on the wheel but the engine still off.

"Turn on the radio," he said.

She said his name. Like the answer to a question on a very easy test, she said, "Quentin," and left it there.

Both of them were wet, chilled.

"My poor car was impounded along with me," she said. "Who knows what new shit they put on board."

"We could take my car," he suggested.

She glanced at the pitiful fool.

"You think mine's bugged?"

She nodded. Then with a unexpected tone, hopeful and strong, she said, "I think the storm's passing."

Insulted, the wind shook them harder than ever. A neighbor's garbage can began rolling down its driveway.

Quentin watched the can's progress. Sandra didn't. To the wheel, she said, "I'm tired," and turned on the engine.

They drove sluggishly out of Eureka, north to the highway and then east for half a league. They never spoke. Invisible ears were listening, and it was too much work to censor their words.

Rolling into a motel parking lot, she said, "Open the gun box."

Three rolls of different colored bills were wrapped in plastic, waiting.

She gave him one roll and vague instructions, and Quentin visited the motel office. Lights were on but no one was at the desk. A silver bell asked to be rung. He rang it twice before calling out, "Hey." From the back room came an old woman smoking a pipe, thin hair dyed black and black lipstick twisted into a scornful, mocking expression.

"Yes?"

"A room."

"Shit of a night," she said.

"You have basement rooms?"

"In my dreams."

"Give me something on the ground."

"Just for you?"

"Yes."

A contract was pushed at Quentin, and he put down the name, "Lewis," and then, "Tenshells." For the address, he used a made-up street and number, and while he was in the mood, he threw in a fictional town from a Johnsgal story. The contract ended with a warning: Prospective tenants would be asked for identification. This didn't look like a place that worried about its customers, but the woman set down her pipe, and with smoke leaking from her nose, she read what he had written while saying, "And I need to see a driver's license."

"No," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"What does the room cost? In cash."

"One twenty," she said.

The bills were shabby, presumably saved over the years. He handed her a full two hundred.

Maybe this never happened before. Or maybe the queen of this realm always smiled at people who threw bribes her way. But the black lipstick got big on her face, and she handed him one key, smiling when she asked, "Do you need another?"

"Sure."

A second key was produced. "Around back, room 137. If the tornado hits, that'll be the last room standing."

The rain was trying to taper, lightning scarce to the west and south. But Sandra had vanished. Stepping out from under the awning, Quentin looked for her car and for her, and then she flashed her headlights from the far end of the building. He trotted over and they drove behind the building, and she slipped between two other cars, opening her hood and expertly unfastening the battery.

She said, "They can't track us now. I hope."

The room key demanded some shaking on her part to work. But once inside, it was their home.

"Just a moment," she said, claiming the bathroom and shutting the door. Water ran in the sink. Quentin turned on the television and sat at the end of the bed. The television came on slowly, as if it were as tired as they were—an old set but with a good tube. The black-and-white picture was clear despite the interference from the feral electricities. A happy weatherman promised that the worst of the storm was through town, and backing up his story, radar showed the province cut in half by a bright white line that was visibly marching east and north.

The bath shower began to run.

Quentin laid on the bed until the wet shirt bothered him, and he stripped off the shirt and his trousers. At some point his eyes closed, and when they opened, the shower had stopped. Standing, he made certain that the front door was bolted, and then he added the steel bar into the bracket on the door and its mate sticking up out of the worn-out carpeting. The television had returned to comfortable programming—women detectives hunting down murderous men. He turned it off and walked to the bathroom door, listening. No water was running. Nobody was moving. With his ear against the cheap door, he imagined a sob. He said, "Sandra," once and then again, and nobody answered him or made any other sound.

The knob lock was set but not completely. With a shake, the mechanism popped, and he stepped slowly into the damp hot room.

There was no air inside the room, just steam hanging thick and white. The woman was sitting inside the empty tub with her knees up and her face turned sideways, turned toward him, the bruised eye closed and crying. She was naked. Her body was flushed with blood and shaking. Two large purple bruises rode her back, and what looked like a boot print was driven into her ribs. Making no noise, she cried, and he kneeled on the hard floor. She didn't want to be touched, and then she did, taking his right hand and holding it between her knees, and he touched the better half of her face, and that's how they sat for the next twenty minutes, neither of them speaking.

A million years ago, the bipedal ape sat in the shade of an acacia tree, his brain weaving a great fable about how he would accomplish his revenge against his god-damn, stinky-shit rivals.

That was the first day in the history of humankind.

The anger was scorching and useless, slashing out in one ridiculous direction after another. Anyone with a role in this poor woman's suffering had to pay. Quentin imagined jailers and federal police and bureaucrats sitting behind tidy desks. Each had a cold face and useful sneers, and one after another, he killed them. He made them cower and they begged for forgiveness, and he slaughtered them in inventive ways, each drama ending with flames and blood and echoing screams.

Nothing about the daydreams was cathartic, yet he couldn't stop them, sitting on the edge of the bed, busying himself by chaining the owner of that boot against a cold limestone wall.

Sandra was older and younger than ever. The lines in her face were deep, but lying on her side, curled up under the bedspread, she had a child's vulnerable pose. Closed eyes worked to hold still, and she took quick shallow breaths, and Quentin studied her until the aching cut him open, and then he looked at the floor.

A noise in her dreams woke her.

He rolled over and watched her.

She tried to smile, asking, "What?"

"I'm sorry."

She didn't react.

He took a breath and held it until it burned, and then the breath was out of him.

"You aren't guilty of anything," she said. "I'm the stupid person who called you when the Federals came through my door. I could have caused you so much trouble."

Except she hadn't, not yet. But that didn't cut the blame and self-loathing. Touching Sandra was important, vital. The black eye didn't want any pressure, but it endured the weight of two shaking fingertips.

"I met Theo," he said.

"I know," she replied. And she was ready to volunteer details, if he pressed.

He didn't. Instead he asked, "Which shit did this to you?"

She said nothing.

"What were their names?"

"It was a woman," she said.

"Who did this?"

"A huge woman, on the first day."

He wrote a quick wrong story.

"She was one of the other prisoners." Sandra shifted her weight, bruises burning. "I was sitting in her spot. I guess. And she taught me a lesson."

"A prisoner?"

"She seemed to be."

"Did they . . . ?" He hesitated. "Interrogate you?"

"I was interviewed. Three times in five days."

He nodded.

"They wanted to know about my son and my political activities." Sandra fell silent and her eyes rolled, and then she said, "The woman who beat me could have been a plant. An agent. That does happen."

He couldn't look at her eyes.

"They didn't," she said.

"Didn't what?"

"Rape me."

"Okay."

"It wasn't like that," she said. "The Federals did nothing but talk."

The urge to stand claimed him.

"Where are you going?"

Until she asked the question, Quentin wasn't sure. But with certainty, he said, "To shower. I really need to."

"I'm going to sleep a little more."

"I'll be right back."

"Okay."

He shut the bathroom door and then wished he hadn't. He felt too alone now. But he left the door closed, stripping out of his wet underwear and socks, sitting on the toilet while waiting for hot water, and in his head, he pulled out a heavy ring of keys and told himself to be kind before unlocking the shackles and cuffs that were holding his prisoners to that wall of limestone and dream.

With his glasses left on the sink, Quentin shut off the bathroom light before stepping into the main room. Every other light and the television were off. Two kinds of blindness took hold. The few shapes were out of focus, and what he assumed to be the bed beckoned. But elves could have entered while he was showering, dragging out the old furniture, replacing everything with big pieces of cake. He imagined frosting instead of the cheap bedspread that felt scratchy and warm against his bare rump. He considered pulling on his underwear, but his clothes were filthy and still wet and what possible reason did he have to be dressed? The stiff foam pillow made his neck ache. The shape beside him was breathing. He touched her softly and then pulled his hand away, mostly sure that she was asleep. He wouldn't sleep. It wasn't even ten o'clock, and his stomach was empty and complaining. But he could lie in the darkness and think, trying to formulate a set of actions and avoidances that together would form the basis of a plan.

Then a hard, deep, and nearly dreamless sleep came. He grew cold on top of the covers, but the slumber was delicious, and waking, even for a moment, would end the pleasure. He didn't want to be part of the world until tomorrow. Goose pimples blossomed on his arms and legs, and his bladder filled until it ached, and the pillow produced a stiff aching cramp that threatened to shatter his neck. Yet he stayed still until Sandra noticed his plight, reaching out from the under the fiercely warm sheets and blankets with a hand that must have been baked in a stove's blue flame.

"You're freezing," she said.

With that encouragement, he shivered.

"Get under here, Quentin."

But he had to pee again. With the bathroom door closed once more, he studied his watch. It should be Saturday morning, nearly dawn. But it wasn't even eleven-thirty in the evening. This night refused to end. He finished and flushed and returned to a familiar landscape composed of unfinished shapes. A face watched his approach. If there was an expression, he couldn't see it. If the voice contained subtleties, he couldn't hear them.

"Do you feel better?" she asked.

"Much."

"Maybe you should put on some clothes."

"Why?"

She rose up on an elbow, explaining, "We might have to leave in a hurry."

He didn't understand. "Why would we?"

"Because this isn't a vacation." Sandra was wearing underwear and a damp blouse. He reached under the sheets, finding a bare leg begging for its razor. Presumably there were trousers in leaping distance. If the police came, Sandra could be dressed and crawling out the back window before they knocked twice. But was there any back window? Clearly, he wasn't good at this life-on-the-run business.

"My clothes are soaked," he said, climbing under the covers.

She put a hand over his cool chest, ready to talk. But she didn't say anything and the hand retreated.

"What?"

"I was just thinking," she said.

He touched the hairy leg and ran his fingers up to her panties, wondering if she would flinch or make some disapproving sound. But she let the hand linger, and after a moment, she said, "I'll never teach again."

He hadn't considered that, but hearing it, he was sure that she was right.

"Warner doesn't want professors who get arrested. And I'll be blacklisted everywhere else, probably for the rest of my life."

He pulled back his hand.

"Something is funny," she began.

He waited. Then he said, "What's funny?"

"The idea doesn't bother me. Banned from teaching. I always imagined it would be awful, but it isn't."

A problem needed solving, and Quentin imagined this woman at the factory, working beside him.

Then she said, "Tonight."

"What?"

She sat up, pulling away the damp shirt. Her breasts felt heavier and softer than usual, or he wasn't remembering them correctly. Either way, he played with them, and she straddled him, lowering her face to where her features became clear. Sandra looked serious and intent, and the sadness that wouldn't surrender any time soon was at least pushed into a cage for now. She kissed his mouth, and he asked, "What were you thinking?"

She tried smiling. "Before or just now?" she asked.

"Before."

"I don't remember," she lied.

Quentin watched what she was doing, and he felt it.

"Are you protected?" he said.

"Not at all," she said.

And then they made love.

"Sage. She said her name was Sage." The name was a pleasure to say, so she used it a third time. "Sage was maybe ten years older than me, and quite pretty. During the first interview, she didn't say much. But it was obvious who was in charge. She was important and so was I, while the rest of the officers were there just to set the mood. To scare me. To coax me. To give the Law gravity, but never enough gravity to crush me out of hand."

Quentin nodded, waiting.

"They usually don't beat you," Sandra said with a lecturer's tone. "Physical measures are for amateurs. Professionals know that you learn more from patience and careful conversation. And it's odd, I know, but I felt lucky. Honored, even. I didn't mind the interviews nearly as much as sitting in that crowded cell with a dozen strange, dangerous women. I felt more at risk inside jail than when I was sitting in that bright little room with Sage and her people. Then it was just her and me. Which is a reliable trick, and for all I know everything else was just to ensure that I would want to remain in that other room, talking politics."

Quentin lay in the dark, listening. There was Sandra's voice, and sometimes a male neighbor beyond the television would cough and then curse. Otherwise, the world was silent, and the air drifting under the locked door was cool, and he felt like sleeping even while he remained perfectly awake, one hand in her hands and the other invested in the cool of her rump.

"For all I know, every word was a lie. Every action was trickery. Her name wasn't Sage, and she didn't care anything about me, and she didn't have a son, much less one serving in the army. Maybe it was acting when she confessed that she was sick, worrying about her twenty-four-year-old boy. But she'd have to be a very good actress. Her son is stationed in Europa, near the Mongol DMZ. Last week, his unit was involved in some little battle. Her connections told her about the firefight, and she still hadn't heard any official news, and it was brutal, the silence.

"Listening to that, watching her face, I felt for the woman. I know, this sounds too simple. But she suddenly asked about Theo. All those emotions in play, and then she finally used his name. She didn't ask where he was or what he might be doing. She simply asked me how much it hurt, being separated from my only child. Then we both cried, and I think that was honest. My tears were. But even if every word was true, the strategy was absolutely devastating. I gave up nothing useful, but I could see that would happen. Another interview, maybe two, and I would have said too much, and that's because my new best friend asked me about my feelings."

Their neighbor coughed twice and then spat.

Quentin lifted his arm, reading his watch. They were eleven minutes into Friday.

"You're tired," she said.

"We both are."

She moved closer.

"Why did they let you go?"

"Maybe to follow me," she admitted. "That was my first thought. They're hoping I'll lead them to Theo and the people who protect him."

"Or maybe somebody helped you get released," he said.

She waited.

"You told me: He's one draft dodger out of thousands. Where's the value in using resources to chase him down?"

She put her mouth next to his ear. "Or they decided that I have connections with some dissident movement."

"Do you?"

She breathed once, and then again, she took a long breath.

He started to turn away.

"What you do or don't do never matters," she said. "What's important is what they believe to be true."

"But maybe you have a friend somewhere. Maybe the friend has pull and got you released."

"Not much pull, if she couldn't keep me from being arrested in the first place."

Quentin's face was warm.

With a hard little voice, Sandra said, "From this moment on, for whatever little rea-

son, they can throw me back into that jail cell again. And this time with twenty bull dykes who will happily, happily make my former imprisonment seem like paradise."

Sandra sat up, staring at her hand while it pressed against his chest.

"Here's a confession. Think what you want about me. But if Sage told me that Theo would have to spend a few months in a jail and a few years working public service jobs, I would have turned him in. I was ready to abandon the people around him too. Not because he would get a slap on his wrist, because he wouldn't have. They would throw him in prison for twenty years. But I would have turned him in just for the promise of that hard, easy slap.

"That was my mood," she said quietly, in astonishment. "And that's what scares me more than anything. I won't let that happen, Quentin. Which is why I've decided . . . this isn't how I wanted to tell you, believe me . . . but I'm going to run, starting in the morning."

"Run?"

"While you were showering," she said. "I made a call. Arrangements are being made."

He said nothing, and she continued to speak, talking to Quentin or to herself, or maybe that Federal in the adjacent room—the one with the smoker's hack. "I'm going to cry and doubt myself, I know. But there's never going to be another day where I will be brave enough to vanish."

Her birth name was Eleni, but for six years she had been Marian IX. She was plain and beautiful at the same time, and she had never felt healthier. Her favorite two boys were built like bulls, but with the temperaments of angels, and she loved them so much that she occasionally considered their futures. What would happen to them when she was dead, or worse, when she grew bored with their geometries?

The future was weighing heavily on the Theotokos tonight.

"What did you think of today's visitor?" she asked.

One of the boys was literate, even a little bit wise. "I think that pony-man was more than a little mad," he said with confidence. "Insanity is easy to spot. The insane believe what they want. They twist the world into shapes that can't abide, and nothing else is real. If it is as he says, if there is a tribe of pony-men savages, they will be slaughtered by our enemies long before they can assemble at our gates. And if for some reason they cannot be destroyed by our enemies, then you will ride out to meet their armies."

"As a very old woman," she said.

"A lovely old lady," he said, and with that he nudged the boy lying beside him in the giant bed.

That other boy was illiterate but never simple. Between the two he was the Theotokos' undisputed favorite.

"Everybody is insane," he said.

The first boy laughed in mocking fashion.

But the young woman cast an admiring eye at the sturdy young fellow, asking, "Why do you say that?"

"Because we bend what we see, and we see what we want. Everybody looks to the future, and we pick what seems best. But every future is just as impossible as any other. Ask yourself. When have we ever gotten the future that we want?"

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A long uncomfortable silence claimed the bed.

Then to himself as much as anyone, the illiterate boy said, "I'll tell you what runs the world, in the Empire and everywhere else too."

"Our Lord," said the first boy.

"Fuck no," the second boy said.

"What then?" asked Eleni, her patience faltering.

"Need," said this hairy animal who could not read ten words. "Need is the principle that carries everything forward."

Sandra promised they could sleep, although she didn't know for how long, and she wasn't sure who or what would wake them up. But she insisted that good people were making plans on her behalf, adding, "We should dry your clothes, our clothes. As best we can."

Quentin's trousers and shirt were given the prime territory, stretched out in front of the room's heater. A battered piece of metal and angry electrons, the heater hummed ominously, throwing out a small, furious wind, and in no time, the air was filled with his stink as well as recycled rainwater. Sandra lay beside him in bed. With that endless, breathless voice, she talked about life on the run. But the word "run" was a misnomer. Most of your time was spent inside a safe house, often confined to a single basement room. What was coming for her was a contemplative existence, including a few books worth long study and the belated chance to write down old thoughts and new ones. Many fine works were composed inside secret closets, and she insisted on looking for the good in this turn of events.

"Good," Quentin echoed.

Then her voice changed. Sandra confessed that her only fear now was that she was going to be very lonely.

Quentin heard the words, and after a moment, he replayed everything else that she had just said, but with a new sensibility.

Of course. The woman was hoping that he would come with her.

But none of her words were explicit. She sat up in bed, naked with the heat and humidity and frank odors, and Quentin wished for any interruption.

The room phone broke into song.

Three short notes, and then the long note—the sound every telephone had made since the beginnings of this awful century.

A man's voice had given them a destination. They were returning to Eureka. The man told them to drive Sandra's car, but only partway, parking on a side street where it might not be noticed for a day or two. Nothing incriminating should be left behind, including fingerprints, he had warned. While Sandra drove, Quentin wiped, never in his life so consumed by a sense of neatness. They didn't speak during the journey, for fear someone was listening, and she acted stony calm, emotions kept under tight control. Warner College and Quentin's home were east of the original main street. They went west, finding a residential road that neither one of them knew, and she parked and lifted the hood again, detaching the battery, and then they walked in the darkness, holding hands until Sandra suddenly pulled hers free.

Finally she was talking, the tone of the voice almost light.

"I've walked leagues back and forth on the Acropolis," she said. "The first time as a student, a few years younger than you are, Quentin. Even for my age, I was very young. But I loved history, and Athens is the center of everything old and rich, and don't believe what old people tell you, that you don't appreciate the importance of things when you're innocent. You do. I did. My Marian spent time and effort protecting the Acropolis from those in the church who saw pagan threats in the ruins. All of

the Theotokos took that as a mission of great significance, and most of the Deipara have done the same. Which was why it was in such marvelous order, the marble and the columns and the repaired statues . . . the Parthenon Frieze alone would have cemented my feelings for the past. . . ."

She was crying, opening her mouth and closing it again, thinking before slowly saying, "There was a boy at the Acropolis. He was seventeen but with an older body, and he was charming and naturally sweet, and he approached us. There were six students, all female, and one of us was a beauty on her worst day, and this was not her worst day. She looked splendid, and we expected the Greek boy to move on her. But no, he ignored the deity among us, and the rest of them too. I was the one he walked beside. I was the girl who learned his name and watched as he bowed to me in that way our grandfathers used to do . . . but in Queensland, we never learned to do it well, and that's why we gave up the gesture. Not because it was old-fashioned, but because we were so painfully miserable at the gesture."

Her voice was rolling faster, but this wasn't a lecture. An emotional vein had been opened, tired purple finding light and fresh oxygen before turning into something vivid, bright and hot.

"Of course my suitor was a professional at this game," she said. "Find a group of tourists and cull the weak one out of the herd. Which was me. He knew exactly what he was doing when he told me that I was a beauty and he loved me at first sight and he could be my friend for as long as I wished and pay him nothing and he would be a good friend, even a great friend. Or I could send him away and he would kill himself before tomorrow. That's the kind of love song he had used on young women for several years already, and I knew that. I understood. And he appreciated my worldliness, at least to the point where he didn't press his love too far. So no, he allowed that maybe he wouldn't slice open his chest and rip his heart from its home. But he told me that I was still quite lovely and looked like a woman who appreciated a good man's charms. And I laughed at him, warning him that he was wrong even when he wasn't. I told him that I was saving myself for my husband. I even mention a fiancé back in Queensland—a man who might or might not have been real. But the boy . . . I always think of him as being years younger than me . . . the boy told me to stop and wait, let my silly girlfriends go ahead. Which they did, but not far. Then he winked and said, 'You have never seen a man give so much of himself at one time.'"

Quentin slowed his gait. But Sandra kept walking and talking, and he had to jog to catch her again.

"I read something once," she said. "Or maybe more than once, I don't know. This isn't my specialty, and my memory can be treacherous with the sciences. But from what I understand, the universe is far larger than we imagine, and every moment of existence stands by itself, and everything only seems connected."

"The Principles," he said.

She seemed not to notice.

"Suppose you were a god," she said. "Suppose gods could stand back and see the universe as infinite examples of what might be. Every moment leads on to a trillion, trillion possibilities, and there is no end to what will arise, and everything possible is inevitable."

"Katarina Tan," he said.

"The sex-crazed mathematician. I know about her."

"I told you about all of this," he insisted.

Sandra stopped walking, grabbing up one of his hands and then the other. They were a block short of their destination—the alleyway running behind the grocery and Treasure City. In the darkness, staring at him, she was smiling and not smiling—an odd expression rendered when weaving emotions tried to gain control over the face.

"They are still there, these past times," she said. "Except they're not the past and they're never endangered. Athens. The Acropolis. That magnificent young man lurking in the marble columns, trying to impress homely girls with his fine Greek body."

"What are you telling me?" asked Quentin.

"You don't know," she said.

He knew that he was exhausted and worried for good reasons, and then he spotted a familiar white car waiting in the alley with its lights out, and for some reason that worried him even more.

"You don't understand?" she asked.

And when Quentin didn't respond in the next moment, she said, "Stay here. You don't need to come any farther."

"Oh," he thought. "She's telling me about Theo's father."

But Quentin didn't say it, and Sandra was talking again. Quickly, softly. "Of course you won't want to go with me, an old woman destined for closets. I don't know why I would ever think you would."

"But I don't want to leave you," he began.

"Besides," she said, "there is a chance, a small but not thin chance, that they won't believe my story, my innocence. And if they don't believe me, they'll take what precautions need to be taken."

"What does that mean?"

Sandra sighed, and she made a point of smiling at Quentin until he smiled back at her, in reflex, and then she put her hands on the sides of his face and pulled his mouth down, kissing him intensely and then less so, and at some imprecise point, she was no longer there.

The opossum waddled across the road, over to Quentin's side of the street, indifferent to him until it discovered that they were on converging paths. Then the creature stopped, hunkering down, growing perfectly still. The scaly tail froze, and the dark eyes gazed straight ahead, and Quentin stopped, arms crossed. They were ten feet apart. "Hello," Quentin said. "You're a beautiful opossum." Another step closed the gap between them. "Roll over. Stick out your tongue. Convince me you're dead."

But his new friend insisted on watchful stillness.

Quentin relented, claiming the middle of the street. The early morning air was cool and damp. His arms were happiest crossed, clinging to the body heat. The plain houses slept, and the people inside them slept, and a car was roaring somewhere, but it was moving away and soon gone, allowing the quiet to come back out of its hiding places, reclaiming the world.

Walking in the street had become habit.

Quentin's house stood on the next corner.

He stopped short, wondering if he could turn and run fast enough to catch the white car.

"Don't," he whispered.

Easter decorations had been set up on the neighbor's yard. Quentin crossed the curb and sidewalk and then the closely mowed grass, standing before the crucifix. The savior's right breast was exposed, sliced from below and bleeding, her hands and feet were pierced with iron spikes, and blood ran down both of her bare legs, proving the carnage wrought by multiple rapes. Yet that face, that unnaturally pretty face, was at peace. This woman was bearing the evil and sin of this world, and to believe anything else was heresy beyond forgiveness.

Quentin stepped close enough to touch that beautiful face, and he kicked over the cross and the savior.

Then he walked the rest of the way home, hunting for bed. ☽

NEXT ISSUE

JUNE ISSUE

Our June 2014 issue leads off with "Shatterdown," **Suzanne Palmer's** heart rending new novelette about planetary exploration and exploitation. While catching our breath from that shattering experience, we can ponder the mysterious "Murder in the Cathedral" that occurs in **Lavie Tidhar's** intriguing alternate history of science fiction novelette.

ALSO IN JUNE

Careful pruning unearths the affect that botanic advances have on a young couple's romantic and financial future in **Ian Creasey's** "Ormonde and Chase"; the silver lining to nature's terrible wrath can be found in new to *Asimov's* author **Kara Dalkey's** science fiction fairy tale about the "Philosopher Duck"; and, while that duck isn't so bad, **James Van Pelt** shows us exactly why we don't want to mess with the dangerous "Turkey Raptor"; esteemed French author **Sylvain Jouty's** first story for us attempts to explore the mystifying "Finges Clearing"; **David Erik Nelson's** convoluted time-travel tale reveals why this time "There Was No Sound of Thunder"; and **Nancy Kress's** young mother gets the reassurance we could all use on the "Sidewalk at 12:10 P.M."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's Reflections column describes the ins and outs of "Another Transition"; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net proclaims "It's an Honor Just to be Nominated"; **Peter Heck's** On Books takes a look at a couple of short story collections by *Asimov's* authors—Kage Baker's posthumous publication, *In the Company of Thieves,* and Bruce McAllister's latest, *The Village Sang to the Sea: A Memoir of Magic;* plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at newsstands on April 1, 2014. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at *www.asimovs.com.* We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader, *Zinio.com, magzter.com/magazines,* and from Google Play!

COMING SOON

new stories by **Allen M. Steele, Sandra McDonald, Nick Wolven, Tochi Onyebuchi, Alexander Jablokov, Evan Fuller, Jeremiah Tolbert, Jay O'Connell, James Patrick Kelly, Doug C. Souza, James Gunn, Karl Bunker, Jason Sanford, Susan Palwick, M. Bennardo, Tim McDaniel,** and many others!

ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Chalk Goddesses

I don't think I will be too far off the mark if I say that Margaret Brundage (1900–1976) was the James Tiptree of her era. An independent, enigmatic, secretive, sophisticated, highly talented woman from outside the genre whose path intersected briefly with the field as she gifted us with her transgressive creations. Pretty good description of both women—on the surface.

Of course, parallels extend only so far. Brundage did not possess Tiptree's gritty cynicism (realism?), but was instead, in her art anyhow, a lush romantic (in the sense that "romance" equals "outré adventures"). Nor was Brundage as self-destructive and conflicted as Tiptree (unless you count Brundage's smoking habit, which eventually killed her). Also, she could dismiss her art as central to her life, when circumstances dictated, and still flourish, whereas Tiptree seemed unable to separate her mundane existence from her therapeutic writings and secret identity.

These thoughts came to me as I gloried in the sumptuous new volume that offers the best perspective yet on Brundage and her too-brief career. *The Alluring Art of Margaret Brundage* (Vanguard Productions, trade paper, $24.95, 128 pages, ISBN 978-1934331507), by Stephen D. Korshak and J. David Spurlock, assembles gorgeous, creamy reproductions of Brundage paintings, but also accumulates the biggest mass of factual material on her ever compiled. The result is supreme eye-candy plus scads of revelatory biographical fascinations.

The elevator-pitch version of Brundage's life is well known. A Depression-era, income-seeking single mother enters, unsolicited, the Chicago office of *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright and shows him a sample of her work. She is commissioned to do one cover. it meets with success, and she goes on to do scores more over the next eight years, to great acclaim, until *Weird Tales* relocates to New York. Because Brundage worked only in a fragile medium—pastel chalks, not oils—her artwork does not tolerate postal shipment to the new publisher, and she loses her sinecure, thereupon vanishing into anonymity, except for receiving a few visits from fans of her work, decades later.

All this is conveyed in just the opening pages of the new book. What follows—after those brilliant reproductions of the famous covers, at a nice large size and on heavy paper with crisp inks—is some great detective work by Korshak, Spurlock, and others. Brundage's pre-*WT* and post-*WT* history is elucidated in great detail, and it's as fascinating as her artistic triumphs.

Brundage spent her formative young womanhood in an ultra-Bohemian atmosphere prevalent in Chicago intellectual and artistic circles of the 1920s, and then in the 1940s and 1950s she was part of a multiracial social justice scene. I won't steal the book's thunder by providing details—you'll want to read the carefully laid-out and research-rich timeline yourself. I'll just say that Brundage emerges from these pages as a fully fleshed and articulated person.

As for those famous covers (plus some never-before-seen stuff)—well, they hold up incredibly well. Sure, there're elements of camp and nostalgia about them. But beneath that lie solid techniques and a unique pagan sensibility and a masterful sense of composition that stands eternal. The eerie and sensuous and decadent atmosphere they evoke continues to haunt.

And that toothsome redheaded gal who crops up again and again, looking anachronistically like Lucille Ball in her glamour-girl years? Insert wolf-whistle here.

Hollywood is Hell

Michael Shea is a phenomenal writer whose career has been vastly undervalued and kept in the shadows, despite a major award here and there, and despite such encomiums as John Clute's description of his work (in the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*) as "witty and disquietingly sophisticated." Almost a cult favorite, he is one of those authors who, once you are hooked on his tales, compel you to rush out and buy anything new by him. But the trouble—trouble, that is, in the marketplace, public-profile sense—has been that Shea is not ultra-prolific. Yes, the past few years have seen a couple of new story collections by him. But if I am reading his bibliography correctly, his last novel—till these two newest—came out in 1993.

Happily, though, the Shea drought ended in 2010, with the publication of *The Extra*. And now we get the sequel, *Assault on Sunrise* (Tor, hardcover, $25.99, 288 pages, ISBN 978-0765324368), with the concluding volume, *Fortress Hollywood*, projected soonish. The series is, on its most basic level, a savage satire on Hollywood, mixed with action-adventure tropes. SF has done many such, from Henry Kuttner's 1939 "Hollywood on the Moon" through Harry Harrison's *The Technicolor Time Machine* (1967). But, just like Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. Shea's take offers so much more—riffs on friendship, ambition, societal inequalities, the future of civilization, a sense of community—that the satirical armature, while adamantium-strong, becomes almost secondary.

In the near-future—say, thirty or forty years ahead—the population of Los Angeles is half what it is now. The dangerous free-for-all area known as the Zoo hosts the bulk of the citizens, while a slightly better lifestyle is available in the 'Rises, giant self-contained towers. Two of our many viewpoint characters, Curtis and Japh, come from the towers, while a third, Jool, hails from the Zoo. (Shea's shifting perspectives in both books, with Curtis getting first-person narration, enlivens the telling.)

And then of course there is the Hollywood enclave, where a new kind of filmmaking flourishes, whose inventor and prime exponent is the sociopathic director, Val Margolian, of Panoply Studios. Vast spectacles are roughed out, huge sets built, and myriad extras hired from among the desperate proles. The extras are turned loose in the sets, and then attacked by animatronic killing machines of various designs—APPs. Any extra who survives is well paid, especially with bonuses for dramatically trashing an APP (in this case, giant tissue-liquefying spiders). But the mortality rate among the humans, all legal, is immense.

Blending the action-packed melodrama of *Escape from Los Angeles* with the video-game rigors of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (although of course it's LARP, not virtual), Shea puts his highly likable troop of characters through a lethal gauntlet that ends with our favorites rich and on their way to a pastoral refuge, and some small but satisfying comeuppances for Margolian and crew.

To continue the movie template, *Assault on Sunrise* is a mix of *Straw Dogs* (for the attack on domesticity), along with *The Blob* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. It hurtles along at breakneck speed.

Curtis and his pals have relocated to the rural community of Sunrise—portrayed with the gonzo vibe of Pynchon's *Vineland*—where they are free of want and harm, just trying to lead simple lives. But Margolian has set his vindictive sights on the town. He engineers a deal with corrupt law enforcement agencies whereby he can force the entire town to participate in another of his productions—this time featuring creepy shapeshifting nano-gel APPs. Soon Sunrise is

at war, with all its able-bodied inhabitants serving as involuntary extras in a life-or-death battle over the course of several days.

Shea depicts his familiar protagonists from *The Extra* as significantly altered by their experiences, both at the start of the book and at the finish. He also introduces a swell bunch of eccentric, colorful newcomers. (Please note that one of the villains is named Mark Millar, after the controversial comics creator infamous for *Kick-Ass* and other violent series.) The plot twists are never-ending and unpredictable, and Shea's flair for portraying action of both the gruesome and noble sort is admirable, often attaining a kind of poetry. Here's his description of a nano-gel invader.

"Under its hydrocarbon sheen, lights woke within it—gleams and wisps and nebulae constellated its interior, as if it were a piece of night sky. It looked like the egg of a universe, a *necro*verse of malignant design, and it made more than a few of them think anew that their world had been stolen, and was now in the hands of aliens."

At the novel's climax, the reader will be exhausted and bathed in nervous sweat, but pleasantly stoked for the next round of David versus Goliath to come.

The Twelfth Book of Wonders

Since 2001, Caitlín Kiernan has been on a roll of high-quality short-story production that rivals such past giants of the field as Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, and Robert Reed. Poetic, vatic, scary, her tough, jeweled stories exude craft and caring. Her latest book, *The Ape's Wife and Other Stories* (Subterranean, hardcover, $40.00, 280 pages, ISBN 978-1596065864), constitutes her twelfth collection since that fairly recent starting date. As Kiernan herself promises in the short introduction, it delivers a potent, wide-ranging assortment of tales, illustrating the many modes at which the author plies her hand—and at which she excels.

The first tale is a steampunk one, "The Steam Dancer (1896)." Not highly plotted, but rather a slice of life, the story introduces us to Missouri Banks, a unique creature. With several cyborg parts, she works as a dancer at the Nine Dragons, a saloon-cum-brothel in a small prairie town. Her sensibility and daily life with her mechanic lover emerge vividly from Kiernan's delicate but robust prose.

Next up is a tale with one of the best homage titles going, "The Maltese Unicorn." Set in an alternate New York during the 1930s, where magic is prevalent, it follows the exploits of part-time bookseller Natalie Beaumont as she gets swept up in the search for the titular MacGuffin. Kiernan expertly recreates the noir stylings and umwelt of Chandler and Hammett, while adding an erotic *Weird Tales* vibe.

"One Tree Hill (The World as Cataclysm)" offers a Lovecraftian or Ramsey Campbellian experience, as we track the intersection of a science journalist with the unnatural doings in a backwater New Hampshire village. Following this comes "The Collier's Venus (1898)," whose title and atmosphere link it with the continuity of the first story. A naturalist and museum-owner named Jeremiah Ogilvy finds himself encountering a "living fossil" of a most disturbingly demiurgic sort.

"Galápagos" is pure-quill SF in the Tiptree manner, as we listen in to the memories of a hospital-confined woman astronaut whose experiences on Mars left her irreversibly damaged in body and soul. Very briefly, "Tall Bodies" gives us a Fortean experience of otherness. But more substantial is the contemporary vampire tale set in Rhode Island, and concerning colonial-era holdovers being uncovered by a scholar, "As Red as Red." "Hydraguros" deploys Westlake stylings and an underworld setting to evoke an eerie blend of crime and the uncanny.

Neal Barrett or David Bunch would have been proud to write the surreal Martian adventure with its rampant neologistic style that is "Slouching Towards the House of Glass Coffins." Time and space warp along strange dimensions in anoth-

er contemporary tale, "Tidal Forces," while "The Sea Troll's Daughter" shines forth as lusty Robert E. Howard blood and thunder. Shades of Robert Aickman and Algernon Blackwood inhabit "Random Thoughts Before a Fatal Crash," which involves "a fairytale obsessed artist" named Albert Perrault and his Parisian exploits. And, finally, the title piece is a potent fantasia on one of the twentieth century's greatest myths, *King Kong*.

Caitlín Kiernan's fecundity is matched only by her devotion to her art, which provides endless enjoyment for what, in a more just world, should be legions of readers.

Six Decades of Bob Argentfloe

This year of 2014 marks the sixtieth anniversary of Robert Silverberg's first published story, "Gorgon Planet." Readers of this magazine don't need to be told that the Grandmaster is alive and well and still writing at the top of his form, albeit not so much in the fiction mode these days. But even those familiar with his work in this venue might have missed the great series of volumes being issued by Subterranean Press that collect the crème de la crème of Silverberg's vast output of stories. Originally projected at eight volumes, the series has now reached that mark while covering only up to the year 1995. It seems likely there will be at least one or two more volumes.

But meanwhile we have *Hot Times in Magma City* (hardcover, $35.00, 408 pages, ISBN 978-1596065888), and it's a winner, containing a baker's dozen of tales from 1990 to 1995. Readers will find the many modes and themes of Silverberg on sturdy display. What's most amazing to me is how Silverberg prefigures or anticipates or pioneeringly establishes many of the styles of the current scene. Kelly Link magic realism? Check. Steampunk? Check. Jeff VanderMeer otherness? Check. "Wherever fantastika goes, Silverberg has been there and left!"

Here are a few highlights.

"A Long Night's Vigil at the Temple" is a touching meditation on faith, set in a far-future world that recalls Silverberg's own *Nightwings*. Silverberg's expertise and fascination with time travel and history get a stimulating workout in the novella "Thebes of the Hundred Gates." Edward Davis, Time Service agent, is sent back to dynastic Egypt in search of two time-castaways. But what if they won't return?

Kuttneresque doings fill "It Comes and It Goes," as a damaged individual must unriddle the personal meaning in an enigmatic home that is sometimes present, sometime not. Expert pastiche informs the pages of "The Martian Invasion Diaries of Henry James," while "Crossing into the Empire" entertainingly conflates commerce and timeslip topography. And the title story offers a near-term Los Angeles beset by volcanic dangers that are met by a haphazard citizen corps.

But my favorite story is the magnificent "The Way to Spook City." Our background: ETs, the Spooks, have colonized the middle of the USA, producing a zone of weirdness. One hundred-plus years later, humans coexist inside and outside the Zone as best they can. Our hero, Nick Demeris, must reluctantly enter the alien dominion to rescue his brother. The odyssey that ensues is humorous, tragic, and utterly palpable.

Much like the *The Collected Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, this set of Silverberg's tales delineates not only one man's genius, but also the historical tapestry of a whole field.

Wolfean Festschrift

Editors J. E. Mooney and Bill Fawcett have assembled a stellar anthology as tribute to a stellar writer. *Shadows of the New Sun: Stories in Honor of Gene Wolfe* (Tor Books, hardcover, $25.99, 336 pages, ISBN 978-0765334589) features original tales from writers as diverse as Neil Gaiman and Timothy Zahn, Joe Haldeman and Jody Lynn Nye, covering the gamut of Wolfe's productions. Some authors choose to enter one of Wolfe's fictional realms directly, while others take

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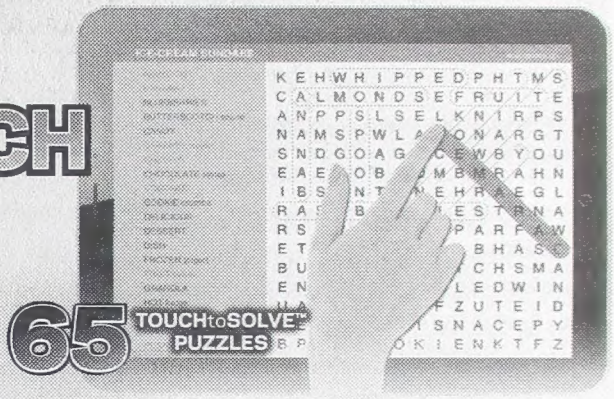

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a more oblique thematic or stylistic bow in his direction. But all the stories definitely orbit around the Wolfean primary. And as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of Wolfe's first major sale, "The Dead Man," in 1965, such a tribute is timely, if not in fact overdue.

Let me briefly itemize some of my favorite contributions.

That list would start with the first story, by Wolfe himself, "Frostfree." Wolfe does Robert Sheckley, featuring a sentient matchmaking refrigerator? Believe it!

Among the stories that engage directly with Wolfe's past fiction, I enjoyed three in particular. Michael Swanwick's "The She-Wolf's Hidden Grin" returns to *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* with the sensitive account of two sisters and their strange upbringing. It provides the nearest emulation of Wolfe's own literary effects. "In the Shadow of the Gate," by William Dietz, features our favorite torturer, Severian, and illuminates the gap between the first two books in *The New Sun* saga. And Marc Aramini's "Soldier of Mercy" gives a neat contemporary twist to Wolfe's Hellenic series.

On the more laterally affectionate tip come several fine pieces. Nancy Kress's ". . . And Other Stories" depicts a young girl subject to imprisonment within great works of literature, and reveals cleverly how she makes her escape. Similarly, Jack Dann's "The Island of Time" finds a young boy in a bad family situation, and his cosmically displacing method of coping. And Steven Savile's "Ashes" maps the tragedy of a love affair cut short, and a magical redemption.

But perhaps my favorite piece—so hard to choose!—is Aaron Allston's "Epistoleros," whose excellent title brilliantly encapsulates both letters and gunmen. In the Republic of Texas, a journalist and some gunslinger companions encounter existential adventures galore.

When you think of which other authors have had such tributary celebrations—Jack Williamson, Isaac Asimov, Jack Vance, Ray Bradbury—you realize the magnitude of the pantheon to which Wolfe has deservedly ascended. ❍

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

My picks for March are FogCon, LunaCon (where I'll be), MillenniCon, MidSouthCon, ConDor and LICon (me again). In early April, there's AggieCon and Ad Astra. Next issue, we'll have the big Easter weekend lineup. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 2014

28-Mar. 2—**Ring of Fire.** For info, write: **Box 66042, Virginia Beach VA 23466.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) **rofcon.com.** (E-mail) **info@rofcon.com.** Con will be held in: Virginia Beach VA (if city omitted, same as in address) at a venue to be announced. Guests will include: none announcd. SF, fantasy, anime, gaming, comics, cosplay, literature, art, music, film.

MARCH 2014

7-9—**FogCon. fogcon.org.** Marriott, Walnut Creek (San Francisco) CA. S. McGuire, T. Powers, James Tiptree Jr. (IM). Literary focus.

7-9—**OmniCon. omnicon.us.** Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville (Memphis) TN. A multi-genre convention, with much gaming.

7-9—**CoastCon. coastcon.org.** MS Coliseum & Quality Inn, Biloxi MS. John de Lancie, Kelley Armstrong, Allen Gilbreath.

7-9—**Wild Wild West Con. wildwildwestcon.com.** Four Points by Sheraton, Tucson AZ. The eponymous TV show/movie. Steampunk.

13-16—**All-Con, Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. all-con.org.** Crowne Plaza, Addison (Dallas) TX. Neil Kaplan. Bill Blair, H. Henry.

14-16—**LunaCon, Box 451, Suffern NY 10901. lunacon.org.** Hilton, Rye Town (NYC) NY. J. Mayberry, R. Gallegos, M. F. Flynn.

14-16—**MillenniCon, 5818 Wilmington Pike #122, Centerville OH 45459. millennicon.org.** Cincinnati OH. Jim C. Hines.

14-16—**Anime Matsuri. animematsuri.com.** George R. Brown Convention Center and Hilton Americas, Houston TX.

19-23—**ICFA. iafa.highpoint.edu.** Airport Marriott, Orlando FL. Okorafor, Ian McDonald, Csicsery-Ronay Jr. Academic conference.

21-23—**MidSouthCon, Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187. midsouthcon.org.** K. Armstrong, the Bielaczycs, T. Weisskopf, L. Martindale.

21-23—**ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. condorcon.org.** Town and Country, San Diego CA. Gail Carriger. SF/fantasy con.

21-23—**VeriCon, H/R SF Assn., 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org.** Harvard Univ. SF, fantasy, comics, gaming.

21-23—**RevelCon, Box 6924, Houston TX 77265. severalunlimited.com.** 18+ only. "The Little Con with the Texas Size Heart".

21-23—**FantaSciCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. fantascicon.com.** Super 8, Dalton GA. Gaming, live music, cosplay.

21-23—**ConTact. contact-conference.org.** Domain Hotel and SETI Institute, Sunnyvale CA. Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence.

28-30—**ConBust. sophia.smith.edu/conbust.** Seelye Hall, Smith College, Northampton MA. SF, fantasy, horror with a feminist view.

28-30—**ArmageddiCon. animepunch.org/armageddicon.** Columbus OH. Anime.

29-30—**LICon, c/o ICon SF, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. li-con.org.** Rockville Centre NY. Nye. Promoting the return of ICon.

APRIL 2014

4-6—**AggieCon, c/o Cepheid Variable, SOST, TAMU, 125 Koldus, Stop 1236, Slot 780, College Stn. TX 77843. aggiecon.tamu.edu.**

4-6—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. ad-astra.org.** Toronto ON. David Weber, Anne. Groell, Patricia Briggs, S. Erikson.

4-6—**A & G Ohio, 3907 Chickadee Ct., Westerville OH 43081. aandgohio.com.** Cincinnati OH. Anime and gaming ("A & G").

4-6—**Anime Detour. animedetour.com.** Doubletree by Hilton, Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Chris Carson, Tony Oliver, Kyle Hebert.

4-6—**PortmeiriCon, 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19459. sixofone.co.uk.** Portmeirion UK. Where cult TV show "The Prisoner" filmed.

4-6—**Chevron, Box 5773, Milton Keynes MKL10 1AS, UK. massiveevents.co.uk.** Radisson, Heathrow (London) UK. StarGate.

11-13—**JordanCon, c/o Box 767353, Roswell GA 30076. jordancon.org.** Patrick Rothfuss, L. Elmore. The works of Robert Jordan.

11-13—**NE Conf. on Science & Skepticism. necss.org.** Fashion Institute of Tech., New York NY. Atheism, debunking superstition.

JULY 2014

17-20—**DetCon 1, c/o Box 3199, Ann Arbor MI 48106. detcon1.org.** Detroit MI. No. American SF Con, with WorldCon abroad. $55.

AUGUST 2014

14-18—**LonCon 3, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. loncon3.org.** Docklands, London UK. The WorldCon. £105/A,C,US$170.

AUGUST 2015

19-23—**Sasquan, c/o Box 1091, Woodinville WA 98072. sasquan.org.** Spokane WA. D. Gerrold, V. McIntyre. The WorldCon. $140.

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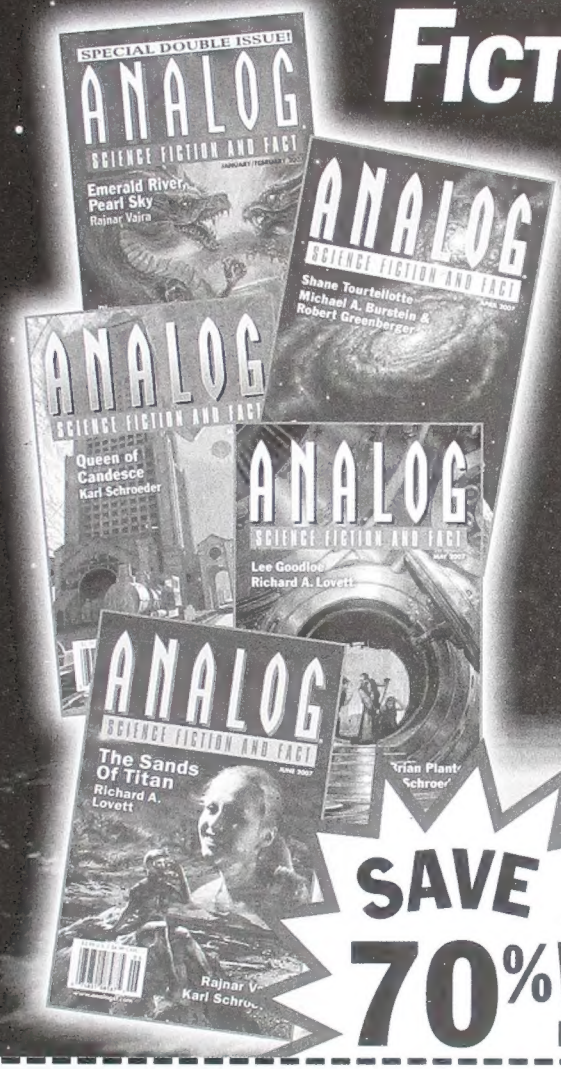

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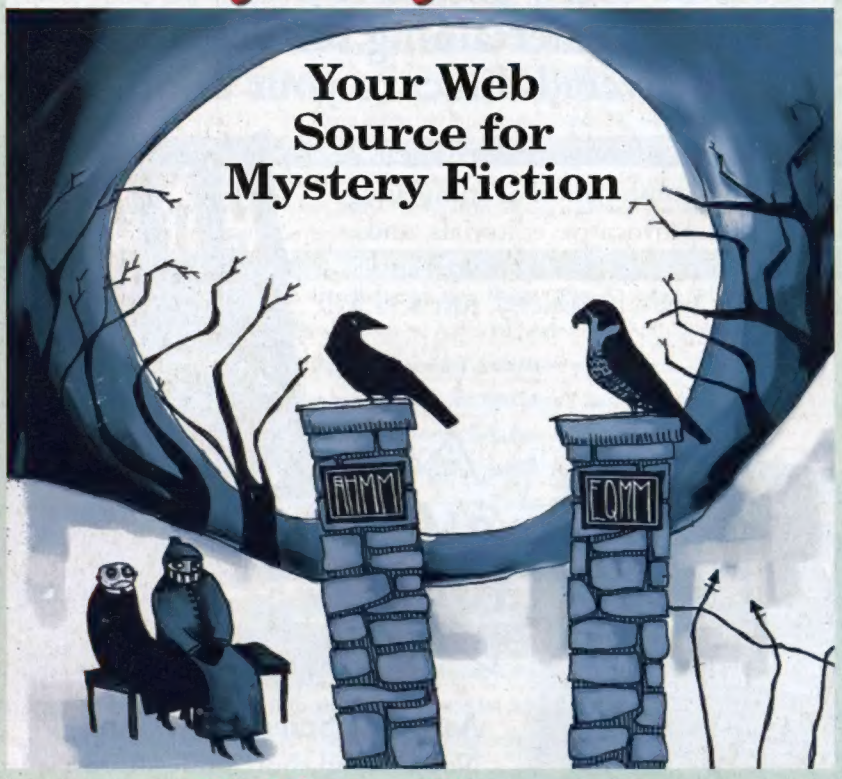

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